

Noach, the man of the earth, debased himself and planted a vineyard. (9:20)

The *Midrash* comments: *Vayichal Noach*, “He (Noach) was *nischalleil*, profaned. Why? *Vayita kerem*, ‘He planted a vine.’” He should have planted something else. *Chazal* are teaching us that, from the get-go, planting the vineyard was a disgraceful, baneful act. The fact that Noach later drank from the fruits of the vine and became inebriated is merely the consequence of his earlier *chillul*, profanation. Elsewhere, *Chazal* state; *Vayichal Noach ish ha’adamah*, “Since he (Noach) required the earth, he became profaned.” Originally, he was referred to as *Noach ish tzaddik*, “the righteous man.” Now that he planted a vineyard, he was transformed into an *ish ha’adamah*. Clearly, we must understand the planting of the vine. What about planting a vineyard could be so harmful? Wine gladdens the heart; it is used for the Altar’s libations, for *Kiddush*, etc.

When we take into consideration the source of this wine shoot, we become even more perplexed. The **Baal HaTurim** cites *Pirkei D’R’Eliezer* that says that this shoot was originally in *Gan Eden*. It was later used by Avraham *Avinu* for his famous *ewishal*, hospitality place. Certainly, if Noach was taking a shoot from *Gan Eden*, it was for a holy purpose. It was not for the mundane. Noach felt it was the correct thing to do. Why is he held in contempt for this fact?

In *Asufas Maarchos*, **Horav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, zl**, explains the error of Noach’s act based upon a similar act of misplaced devotion exhibited by Avuyah, father of Elisha, the *Tanna* who, as a result of his heretical views, later became known as Acheir, the Other One. Elisha *ben* Avuyah was once a great man, destined to become one of the greatest *Tannaim*. His distinguished disciple was Rabbi Meir, who continued to repeat the lessons he had learned from his *Rebbe* prior to his turning away from the Torah. Yet, he ended up as the infamous Acheir, a man with no name. What happened?

Shlomo *Hamelech* says, *Tov acharis davar meireishis davar*, “The end of a matter is better than its beginning” (*Koheles* 7:8). Rabbi Akiva commented concerning this *pasuk*, “The end is better.” When? “At such a time that it is better than its beginning.” What is the meaning of this statement? *Chazal* (*Yerushalmi Chagigah* 2:1) explain that this refers to Avuya, the father of Elisha, who was himself one of the primary Torah scholars in Yerushalayim. On the day of Elisha’s *Bris*, circumcision, he invited all of the sages of Yerushalayim, placing them all in one large room. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua had a separate room for themselves. While the others were occupied with celebrating the festivities, Rabbi Eliezer said to Rabbi Yehoshua, “While they are busy with themselves, let us be occupied with ourselves.” They immediately sat down to learn Torah with a fervor that was expected of such Torah giants. Their studies covered the entire gamut of the Written Law, *Chumash*, *Neviim* and *Kesuvim*. Their learning was so intense that a great fire descended from Heaven and surrounded them.

At this point, Avuyah noticed them and said, “If this is the power of Torah, I dedicate my son to the

study of Torah.” *Chazal* say, since his intention was not completely *l’shem Shomayim*, for Heaven’s sake, the Torah did not endure in his son, Elisha.

Let us understand this *Chazal*. Avuyah was not an insignificant person. This is indicated by the fact that the distinguished sages of Yerushalayim attended his celebration. Furthermore, the mere fact that he saw the Heavenly fire surrounding the two *Tannaim* as they were learning, something which no one else was able to notice, indicates his spiritual stature. Undoubtedly, Avuyah’s intention was for his son to develop into a Torah giant, just like the other rabbis. So, what did he do so wrong that warranted such a tragic end to his son’s Torah stardom?

Rav Goldvicht explains that, indeed, his failing was miniscule. Regrettably, great people are not allowed even the minutest infraction. When Avuyah observed the incredible honor granted one who studies Torah, that tinge of honor affected his thought process, so that when he dedicated his son to Torah study, a vestige of personal prejudice was involved. It was not all for the sake of Torah. There was a speck of *kavod*, honor, intermingled. It was not much, but it was enough to affect the purity of the *lishmah*, for Torah’s sake. When is the “end” good? Only when the “beginning” is good.

Reishis, “the beginning,” must be pristine – if the conclusion is also to be without taint. This concept does not appear to be consistent with *Chazal’s* statement (*Pesachim* 50b), “One should occupy himself with the study of Torah and *mitzvah* observance even if it is not *lishmah*, for its sake, because *mitoch shelo lishmah bah lishmah*, from doing it not for its sake one will come to study Torah and perform *mitzvos* for the sake of the *mitzvah*.” Indeed, **Horav Chaim Volozhiner, zl**, posits that it is impractical, almost impossible, for one to achieve the spiritual plateau of *lishmah* initially, from the very beginning, without first going through a period of *shelo lishmah*. He compares this to one who attempts to climb to a high place without the use of a ladder. The steps, one at a time, facilitate his ascent. Likewise, the *shelo lishmah* allows for the *lishmah* to be realized.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that, when a seed is planted, the tree’s potential growth is determined. The very beginning of growth must be pure, free of any vestige that might blemish its growth. The young plants’ growth is based on the beginning, because this is when it takes root, when its foundation is established. Later on, when it has reached a certain level of maturity, the effects of outside negative influences are not as detrimental.

In establishing an organization, institution, or any major endeavor or undertaking, what takes place in the beginning has compelling ramifications. Altering of the *lishmah* factor by Avuyah produced a spiritual cripple who would one day earn the infamous appellation of *Acheir*, the “other one.” How careful we must be – especially at the onset of any project – to remain focused on its purity, pristine goals and objectives.

Where did Noach go wrong? He planted a vine. Having survived the destruction of the world, Noach was charged with rebuilding it. When he first entered the *Teivah*, Ark, he took along seeds

and shoots from every growing plant and vegetation. Now that he was leaving the Ark with the intention to commence the rebuilding, he had the opportunity to begin by planting the agricultural products necessary to sustain the human race. Yet, rather than select wheat to make bread, he chose to plant a vine. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with wine; on the contrary, as mentioned earlier, it is used to gladden the heart and poured for the sacrificial libations. As the first planting, however, as Noah's commencement to rebuild the world, it left something to be desired. The world is not rebuilt on the foundation of the vine. Wine is wonderful, but it requires great care upon imbibing it. Without control, wine can be dangerous. It was, therefore, not a good choice as the beginning for establishing the standard for human sustenance.

Rav Goldvicht goes a drop further in applying the idea of *reishis*, beginning, to explain the unpardonable sin of Amalek. The Amalek nation was not the only people who challenged the Jews. Yet, they are the only one whom we are to make a point to remember to obliterate. Why? They were the first to rise up against the Jews, to challenge Hashem's protection to His people. After the liberation of the Jews from Egypt amidst unprecedented miracles and wonders, no nation had the gall to start up with us – no nation – except Amalek. Furthermore, it was no ordinary period in our history. Amalek attacked at a time during which our relationship with Hashem was just beginning. It was the period when our spiritual foundation was in the process of being concretized. We were on an unparalleled spiritual high. Amalek's incursion was purposeful – to destroy our relationship with Hashem; to demean our faith; to undermine the glorious rapture that ensconced us during the early moments of nationhood.

Amalek plunged into the burning hot pool of spiritual elevation, something which no other nation dared do, and succeeded in cooling the existing temperature. True, he was burnt, but the fiery heat was now abated. Other nations could now make their own attempt. One who attacks the "beginning" deserves his own "beginning": a singular punishment, unprecedented and unsympathetic, one that endures for eternity.

The European Holocaust was a cataclysmic destruction much like the Flood – only it did not devastate the entire world, "only" European Jewry. Six million souls ascended to Heaven, as they sacrificed their lives to sanctify His Name. If not for a handful of survivors whose goal was to rebuild the glorious Torah world of Europe, their memory would have vanished together with them. I have selected the life of one of these visionary builders due to his devotion to the ideal of maintaining the pristine nature of *reishis*, the beginning.

The *Ponevezher Rav*, **Horav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, zl**, can be credited with re-establishing the Torah world in *Eretz Yisrael* post-Holocaust. Indeed, most of the *yeshivos* functioning in *Eretz Yisrael* today are either a direct result of his efforts or offshoots of his work. The *Ponevezher Rav* was a brilliant *Talmudic* scholar who was well-known as such prior to World War II, at a time in which Europe had no dearth of Torah giants. It was his fiery love of Torah and firm trust in Hashem which served as the foundation upon which he erected his *yeshivah*. He had no money, no financial support – only a dream, a vision which he sought to transform into reality.

He was asked by *Horav Shlomo Lorincz, zl*, a close confidante, how a person in his position, having lost his entire family, his community, all of the European Torah institutions, could exhibit such a degree of extraordinary creativity and acumen that would shame a man much younger than he. He explained, "The truth is, I am engulfed by dejection and despair; yet, this is precisely why I am involved in building... In my situation, there are just two options: either I roam around and break windows, or I build and I build without stopping!"

His tormented spirit was soothed by devoting himself to rebuilding the devastated *yeshivos*. He did not permit the empty feeling within him to fester and destroy him. Instead, he garnered his pain, harnessing it into a source of unparalleled creativity. There is insufficient space available to describe this Torah giant, but, for our purpose, I cite from a letter he sent to *Eretz Yisrael* in 1955:

"Upon one of Bnei Brak's beautiful inclines, there rises a huge building bearing the name of the *Ponevezh Yeshivah*. This great edifice was erected in the proximity of Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues without assistance from any official sources, without any allocations from the government, the Jewish Agency or political parties; rather, it was established in the merit of the holy *Ponevezh Yeshivah* in Heaven. This *yeshivah* was built through the merit and the pure spirits of holy and pure individuals, the many hundreds of *roshei yeshivah* and *talmidim*, students, of *Ponevezh Yeshivah* in Lithuania, who sanctified Hashem's Name throughout their lives, until their very last moments, when they returned their pure souls to their Creator. In their merit, Torah is being increased within its walls and hundreds of sons of *Tzion*, who are more precious than gold, study the Torah of our G-d, day and night. In their merit, our holy *yeshivah* is suspended between Heaven and earth, alive and well, aspiring to and achieving its one and only goal, spreading Torah among our holy people and elevating the prestige of Torah in *Klal Yisrael*..."

Everything about the founding, establishment and maintenance of the *yeshivah* was beyond the realm of reality. The founder was a physically ill person who stopped at nothing to build Torah. He had no funds, but he was considered a master fundraiser. He gave up his ability to be known as a *gaon olam*, prodigious Torah scholar, to become instead a *Rosh Yeshivah*, builder of Torah for thousands. As he himself once said, "I sacrificed the status of the *Ponvezher Gaon* for the sake of the *Ponevezh Yeshivah*."