

Parshas Noach – Dr J H E Cohn (*Reprinted*)

ד' מרחשון תשע"ו – 16<sup>th</sup> October 2015 – שבת פ' נח

There is a change in the climate; the world is warming. Of that there is little doubt, and it has been happening for well over a century, as we can see from receding glaciers, for example. Changes in the average ambient temperatures, in both directions, have always occurred. The Romans grew vines against Hadrian's wall, whereas it is now barely possible to grow them outdoors in London. Summer temperatures in Britain were clearly higher than now. There is evidence for recent acceleration in the rate of increase of temperature. There is an abrupt tree-line on many mountain sides. This line divides the higher areas where trees can no longer grow, from the land below where they manage to survive. Near the line itself, there are gnarled trees of considerable age, which may barely have reached head height. These trees have shown a noticeable spurt of growth in the last decade.

It is suggested, although as yet unproven, that human activity through the emission of green house gases is a contributory factor in this acceleration. We are constantly being warned of the dire consequences of this, and it does seem to make sense to take reasonable precautions. But in any case, the change and certainly any human contribution towards it is gradual.

But once upon a time there was a sudden and huge change, brought about directly by the Ribono shel Olam. There was what we call the Flood. Read the Sedra superficially, and all that seems to be there is a story of rising and falling water. Much more lurks beneath the surface of that water. Man, nature and even physics were altered. Nothing remained the same afterwards.

The seven Noachite laws, are rules which even non-Jews are expected to keep. Chazal derive these from Gen. 2, 16. But this possuk was said to Odom hoRishon not to Noach; Mankind was expected to obey them long before the flood, and indeed the Flood was a punishment for failure to conform. This immediately raises the question why we call them Sheva Mitzvoth b'nai Noach, and not b'nai Odom. One suggested reason is that one of the laws was changed after the Flood. After the Flood, eating meat was permitted as long as it was not cut from a living animal, whereas before there was a total ban on slaughtering animals for food.

We find too that Man's life span became greatly reduced after the Flood, albeit gradually. Sons regularly died during the lifetimes of their fathers. The Torah first mentions this in connection with Horon (Gen. 11, 28). The Vilna Gaon points out that, although it had happened in earlier generations too, this was the first time in chronological order. From the Possuk (Gen. 8, 22) promising Noach that from then onwards there would be no interruption to the seasons, there is the suggestion that seasons were a new phenomenon which had not occurred previously, in other words, that the tilt of the earth's axis relative to its plane of rotation round the sun was put in place only after the Flood.

Finally, Noach was given the rainbow as a sign that there would be no repetition of the Flood (Gen. 9,13 ff.). That too was clearly a new phenomenon. Now the rainbow is caused by refraction and reflection of the light entering the raindrops, and the reason for the colours which make up sunlight is the differential refraction of the different colours. It appears, therefore, that differential refraction was not a feature prior to the Flood, in other words that the very laws of physics had been changed.

Perhaps with this insight, we may attempt to reconcile some of the difficulties we may have in understanding the scientific evidence of the age of the earth. Methods such as carbon dating of features found in the earth rest on the assumption that the rate of decay of certain isotopes is unchanging. This certainly appears to be the case now, but if we are prepared to contemplate that it might have been changed, as so much else was, at the time of Flood, then perhaps we may have the beginnings of a greater Emunah.