

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most important part of any work, before pen is ever set to paper, is to have an idea of what one hopes to accomplish. In the case of this project, our goal was not to set before the reader a pleasantly-written collection of midrashim. I did not attempt to include every midrash, nor did I bring down alternate opinions regarding the midrashim that are cited. Most of the main characters are entirely fictional. The story of their lives does not begin with the stories recorded in the Torah and midrashim, nor does it end when the main story is over. What, then, is the goal of such a work?

Again, Chazal have noted the power of the moshol. Aside from its well-known power to bring abstract ideas to a tangible expression, making them more digestible in the student's mind, a story has the power to bring home information in a way that simply telling something over never will. Instead of being aware of a certain event, the facts are suddenly real, suddenly alive. This is the magic of the leil Pesach, when we are instructed to tell over the story of yetzias Mitzrayim. We must view ourselves as if we-personally, left Mitzrayim, as if it were our brothers, sisters, and family that awoke one morning to find our oppressors wailing in the streets, their firstborn slaughtered, while the great and mighty king came to our next-door neighbor Moshe Rabbeinu, and begged us to leave with all due haste.

Seeing is believing. And while we can never see the events of Tanach as they occurred, a story told as if we were there can do wonders for our appreciation of what actually happened. It makes it real for us. What would you do if you had to walk two blocks down the street to pick up your daily mon? Would you be humbled or resentful, when your

neighbor found his mon on his doorstep? What if two angels came to your city, and then rained sulfur and ashes on it, turned the tectonic plate that it sat on upside down, and you were only saved because of the merit of your uncle? What if you witnessed a man thrown into a fiery furnace, who stayed there, comfortably, for three days, without any supply of food and water? It's a different world, literally, than simply being told these things happened. It's a different world, because it's your world.

The purpose of this project is to present the episodes of Tanach through the lens of fictional characters who might have lived at that time, whom we can relate to, from whose eyes we can witness and take part in these events. To know the mind of the tzaddikim who lived then is impossible, but we hope at least to step into the world of an ordinary person who might have lived then, who could have watched these great men and tried to appreciate them.

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To ensure that the content accurately and sensitively reflects the reality we are trying to convey, prominent Rabbanim will review the entire project from start to finish.

There are times when the midrashim we cite are the subject of debate. Since a major part of this project was literary, in the sense that the reader is invited to feel as if he lived through the material, we did not include any reference to alternate opinions or debate. By all means, however, the reader is strongly encouraged to follow the references, look up there sources, and, above all, to learn. One corollary goal of this project is to stimulate interest in the source material.

Anything that is not sourced in the footnotes, and is not a well-known fact, is part of the fictional trappings of the story, and should not be assumed to be based in any midrash. Furthermore, our treatment of characters mentioned in Tanach is as accurate a guess as we can make. But who can know how these people acted, how they responded to the

world around them? Avraham was the physical embodiment of chessed. But the Midrash relates that he cursed the builders of the tower of Bavel in the name of Hashem. What would that have looked like to an observer? The answer is that we cannot tell how tall a mountain is with any accuracy, just by gazing at it from several miles away. Similarly, it is impossible to try to accurately understand the Avos.

Knowing the great people of times of yore is beyond us. As Rav Wolbe once put it: the sun is 93 million miles from Earth. On a hot day, we feel we need to be inside to escape its heat. If we leave the blinds open just a crack, we can live with the heat, but it's still strong. The Avos, the gedolim of past generations, are like the sun. When we talk about emulating them, we aren't even talking about going outside. Our greatest hope is that we end up with the blinds open just a little more. But even if we were standing outside, in the middle of a desert, with the heat baking our skins, we should remember that we're still 93,000,000 miles (491 billion feet!) away from them.

We therefore were very careful with our treatment of the Avos and other great personalities of Tanach, to make sure that our presentation of them could reflect an accurate picture of the way they spoke and acted. But of course, these attempts are limited by our capacity for appreciating their greatness, and we can only daven that our attempts showcase their holiness and purity.

With that in mind, let us be warmed by the fire of the chachamim (Avos, 2:15), but let us never think that we truly know them.

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Ramat Beit Shemesh

THE PROPOSITION

It was nearing nightfall. Uriel was with his father, collecting the sheaves his father cut down. On the other side of the field, his two brothers, On and Ames, were doing the same thing. Eventually, Father stopped, put his hand to his eyes, and looked towards the setting sun. “Ho, On! Ames! The sun sets. We have reached the time to return to the house.”

He gathered together the tools they had brought, and headed back to their shanty at the edge of the field, the three boys following after. At the door, Father stopped. Since Mother had died, he had not once walked into his house without pausing at the door to remember who would not be inside waiting for him. After twenty years, the boys did not even notice the pause. It had become just another part of their lives.

Uriel’s wife had already made dinner for them. On lit a fire in the pit by the edge of the room, and the five of them sat down jovially to their small feast.

Talk centered mostly around the harvest. As was his wont, Ames left the table early to stroll through the wheat-fields alone. The meal ended quickly enough. Father had never really made eating a goal in itself, and his attitude wore off on the rest of them. Conversation had always been more important. After the meal, On cleared the scraps of food, Uriel got out the blankets, and Father took out his small flute, as was his custom after the evening meal.

Ames returned from his brief foray, slipping quietly into the room just as Father began. He sat down comfortably, eyes closed and a smile on his face, as the music from the flute wafted through the small room. Father was feeling slightly melancholy; the tune he played was a haunting melody of his own devising. It filled the chambers of their small home, whispering of unseen and unknown terrors, quiet peace, and hard work. The song wound down, and drifted away into the night.

Uriel, eyes closed, thought about Great-Grandfather, the new Father of humanity. When Hashem had destroyed the world, it was Noah he saved. He and his three sons. The years had not been kind to Noah. He was very old now, and wont to lapse into lamenting the world that had died. *“Before the Flood, there were no seasons.¹ We, in our great sinfulness, we were not happy with Hashem’s goodness to us. If only we do not deny His goodness again.”*

Into his thoughts, and the stillness of the room, a voice spoke. “Someone comes.” It was Ames. “He rides upon a horse.”

This was indeed news. Visitors were unusual, important visitors less so. Although Father was a highly respected persona, they rarely saw visitors. Generally, they were happy to tend their small farm quietly, and the road to their house did not lead anywhere else.

“Who is this?” asked On. He was not expecting an answer. He took out a small loaf of bread and a flask of wine for the visitor, and left the house to draw water for washing. He returned quickly, with no bucket, and a look of disgust on his face. “Nimrod,” He said.

Uriel looked up in annoyance, but immediately forced his features back into an impassive calm. He looked to Ames, who turned to face the wall, unwilling to show his dislike for the visitor, but equally unwilling to hide it. Father sighed and shrugged his shoulders slightly. “Nevertheless,

1.) *Sforno*, 8:22.

On,” he began, “it is not our way to turn out guests. Please bring the water.” Silence reigned as On left the house.

He returned without incident, carrying the bucket of water in both hands. Ames sat scowling in the corner, while the rest of the family waited patiently for their unwanted visitor.

It was not long before the sound of a horse outside heralded the presence of their guest. Uriel, with all the good graces he could muster, took a small bag of hay and brought it outside to the visitor.

He was tall, but not overly so, with a short-cropped gray beard covering a thickly muscled chest. His black skin² glistened in the moonlight. The man’s eyes, from what could be seen in the darkness, were blue, and sunk slightly into his forehead. They twinkled kindly above a somber expression. “*This is the cold-blooded ‘Mighty Warrior before Hashem?’*”³ he thought.

“Thank you,” the man said, taking the sack of hay for his horse. Uriel said nothing, unsure of himself before the man who had caused so much pain to the world. They walked towards the door, Uriel standing slightly behind him. They did not talk. The visitor, upon arriving at the door, clapped politely three times, and waited to be invited in.

Father opened the door immediately. He stood in the doorway, a slight grimace on his face, as if he had just eaten something sour. “Come in,” he said. He stepped aside.

The man entered the room, Uriel behind him, and took in the two men and one woman waiting there for him. They did not offer him food. “You knew I was coming?” the man asked.

2.) *Sanhedrin*, 108b. according to Rashi *s.v. lak b’oro*, Kush, who was Nimrod’s father, was the first person whose skin was blackened.

3.) *Bereishis*, 10:9.

Father nodded. “I have heard rumors.” Uriel looked up sharply. This was news to him. By the looks of things, On and Ames knew nothing of it, either.

“I shall not come,” Father said.

“Come,” the man said gently. “It is for your benefit.”

“You are the ‘mighty warrior,’” Father began sternly. “You have killed, you have stolen, and now you come to wage war against Hashem.⁴ I shall not come.”

“I come to sustain, not to destroy.” He looked apologetic, even shamed over Father’s words. “True, I warred with others, and not for want of food.⁵ But I did this for the good of every man. When we are together, we shall be all the stronger. I did not come with warriors,” he added, though they all knew that he could have. “I wish only your wise counsel, and your help.”

“You shall not have it. The son of Shem shall not serve the Master of Cham, the slave of slaves!” Father’s words were harsh, but he spoke quietly, and with simple authority. There was even some sympathy in his gaze. “Great-Grandfather spoke well. It is not good for the children of Cham to take power. I am sorry.”

The Scion of Cham looked up suddenly. “The one who pronounced that curse has retracted from it,”⁶ he said. Uriel, standing off to the side, gasped in surprise. *Great-Grandfather?* “He came with me, for he thinks that I act fittingly. He and all his sons are with me.”

4.) Ibid. 10:8, Rashi, *s.v. lihiyos gibor*.

5.) “Until his time, there were neither wars nor kings. He first subjugated the men of Bavel, and afterwards...” Ramban, 10:9.

6.) Ralbag, “Know that even Noach and his children were among the builders of the tower.”

Father stood shocked. “How can it be that Shem, the father of my father, servant of the Lo-rd, serves one who worships the stars? Do you now steal souls, as well as property?”

“Come, I-Shall-See.” He phrased Father’s name, Ara’eh, so that it was a statement. “Come and see. Great-Grandfather sees no connection between my heart’s desire and my soul’s. I have come to help us all. If your father’s father needs no intermediary between himself and Hashem, then he is better than I.”⁷

“I will listen to your words,” Father said, and only then handed Nimrod the food they had put out for him. Uriel, as well as Nimrod, heard the unspoken second half of Father’s words, “*Though I do not say that I will go with you.*” Ames, however, did not. He turned from his corner, seething.

“You wish to help us, Let-Us-Rebel? You wish us all to bow to the works of man! True is your name, for you recognize your Master and intend to rebel against Him!”

Father calmly walked over to Ames, and slapped him across the face. And again. Hard. “Do not speak before your father without permission.” Accepting the rebuke, Ames sat back down and forced calm upon himself.

Nimrod turned to Ames, and favored him with a hurt look. “You, more than your friends, know that a name is not given by its bearer, I-Shall-

7.) “In the days of Enosh humanity made a tremendous mistake... they said, ‘since the Lo-rd made these stars and planets to control the world, and He placed them on high and apportioned them glory, and they are the servants who servcec before Him, it is appropriate to praise *them* and beautify them and honor them. And this is the desire of Hashem” (Rambam, Avodah Zarah, 1:1). Many commentators see the *eigel hazahaz* as an attempt by the Jewish people to create a leader or intermediary who would bring them closer to Hashem (see Ramban, for instance). This is, technically, idolatry, although the Jews clearly did not see it as such. It is often the case that a strong idolatrous sect begins simply by serving “G-d’s messengers,” and then forgets Hashem entirely.

Die. When your mother named you, moments before she died, did she intend to curse you? Or was she thinking about herself?”

He turned to On, who had been watching the exchange quietly. “And you, On, are you really a Sin?”

On looked a question at his father, who nodded his permission to respond. “My mother said, ‘the Time of my joy has arrived,’” he began carefully. “She called me On due to her *Onas Simcha*.”

“Forgive me,” Nimrod apologized. “I was assuming.” On nodded slowly. Nimrod turned back to Father, and looked him straight in the eyes. “I would build a city, with a great tower at its center-”

“Why?” Father interrupted.

“There, all the people shall gather as one. It shall centralize the people. Every son of Odom shall come to me there, and we shall be one people – a great, mighty people. We shall have no wars – for whom would we war against? We shall always have food in plenty, for the deficiencies of one shall be made up in the other.” There was a warm smile on his face now, and his eyes drifted out of focus as his mind turned towards his vision. “We shall be a perfect people, with our heads high. My tower shall reach to the Heavens!”

Father sat quietly, considering. He looked at Uriel, and, as often happened between the two, they seemed to confer without ever actually speaking. Nimrod was an idolater. There was no doubt of that. He was also power hungry and ruthless. Stories of his cruelty were legendary. He had virtually invented the concept of slavery, forcing others to fall under his dominion. It was something that had never been heard of before.

Yet the man who stood before them seemed none of those things. He was quiet, considerate, and contemplative, and he seemed to genuinely intend to benefit those around him.

Even if this were some devious plot to become master of all of the Sons of Noach, as it was rumored, the chances were very low that he would succeed. Nobody could gain that kind of power over everyone. It was much more likely that, as he had said, the results would be a unified, powerful people, masters of the world and its inhabitants.

Whatever he intended for the Tower, it would end as a gathering place of the great and Holy; it would be a benefit to the servants of Hashem, far more than it would to idolaters like Nimrod. At least, Shem ben Noach seemed to think so, and that ought to be good enough for anyone.

Anyone but Father. He was still unconvinced. But Uriel shrugged, as if to say, *you know that you have already made your mind up.*

Father turned to Nimrod, who had maintained a respectful silence during the entire exchange, and frowned. Why did Nimrod have to present him with a choice like this? Nevertheless...

“We shall come,” he said.

THE BRICK

~ PART I ~

Ames grunted under the weight of his load. He had been assigned as a carrier, one of the innumerable scores of people who brought materials to the top of the tower. He was only a few hours from the top, but he knew that it would seem like forever if he let himself think about it. It already took several weeks to make the trip; it was estimated that soon it would take months, or even years.⁸ It was incredible how fast the tower had gone up; it seemed that for every brick they laid, two bricks ended up in the wall.⁹

Yet Ames was not happy with his work. At the beginning, the spirit of cooperation had prevailed on everyone, and it had seemed that Nimrod's great vision for a unified humanity would soon be realized. But the master of Cham was an idolater. Most of his followers were idolatrous as well. Ames could not believe that the fools who wished to attack Hashem with axes and hammers would be successful, but the vast numbers of humanity who worshipped the sun, moon, stars, and the work of their hands had almost turned the project from a tower of unity to a pagan temple.¹⁰

8.) *Sefer Hayashar* says that it took a full year to bring materials from the ground to the top of the tower.

9.) *Bereishis Rabbah*, 38:10.

10.) There were three groups among the builders of the tower. Some said, "We will go up and dwell there." Some said, "We will go up and worship *avodah zarah*." Some said, "We will go up and do war (against Hashem)." (*Yalkut Shimoni*, 62.)

He looked to the left, and scowled. A group of Cham's children, all bare-chested and sweating in the heat, walked past him. They were exempt from the work of building, for they prayed day and night to the sun for success. Nimrod was high-priest of the sun,¹¹ and his acolytes were given full respect. It was disgusting.

He had half a mind to dump his load of bricks over the side of the tower, and leave this horrible place forever. Of course, he couldn't do that. How could he abandon Father in this pit? He started again on his way, and ran into someone rushing in the other direction. He almost knocked the man out of the tower, but at the last second, Ames managed to twist sideways, so that the man was not struck by the bulk of his body. His hateful load tumbled out of his hands, and most of it dropped straight into the abyss over the edge of the tower. The man didn't even glance up, so intent was he on his mission. But as he disappeared down the stairwell – the *wrong* stairwell, for this one was meant for upbound traffic¹² - the Followers of the Sun approached him with fiery eyes. "What have you done?" one of them demanded. "It is a twisted thing that cannot be straightened! Now, the whole world waits upon you, to bring us more bricks."¹³

"Fool, and son of a fool!" Ames snarled. "Is it better in your eyes that a man should fall from the tower, than a weight of bricks? Here! The sun sets in the west! Go after your master, who helps not!" He hurriedly gathered the few remaining bricks and continued on his way.

It was already night when he reached the top of the tower, but of course, the work continued. Ames went to the foreman, and unceremoniously dumped what was left of his load, then he went off to find his family's

11.) In *Behold a People*, Rav Avigdor Miller states that some identified Nimrod with Hammu-Rabi, the "Sun Master." (Alternately, "Master of (C)ham.")

12.) *Pirkei D'rebbe Eliezer*, 24. The east stairwells were for upbound traffic, the west stairwell for down.

13.) "If a person fell, and died, they didn't pay attention, but if a single brick fell, they would sit and weep," (*Pirkei D'rebbe Eliezer*, 24).

quarters. They lived in what eventually would be the middle of the tower, but right now was very close to the top. Father was a director, making sure the flow of food and materials continued smoothly. On and Uriel both were workers, but Ames knew they intended to find some other job. They would not leave their father to move into a lodging closer to the top, and he would not join them. “This place is already high,” he had said. “I do not know what will be at the end of this deed. I shall not go further up.”

He found them all in their quarters. Uriel saw him first, and went to tell Father. They had already finished supper, but Ames knew there would be food for him. On came out with his new bride, and gave Ames a smile. “I was glad that you arrived.”

“Why?” Ames asked. He was still annoyed about the day’s events, and he ignored On’s unusual chattiness. “Did you think that I fell? The Followers of the Sun almost pushed me out, when I preferred a human soul to a load of bricks.” He started to fill On in on what had happened to him, but he was cut off by a voice to the side of him.

“Be careful with yourself,” Father said quietly. “I dreamt that such would happen.” Ames looked up suddenly, as Uriel entered with Father. He carried Father’s arm in one hand – Father’s health had begun to fail lately – and in the other he held a loaf of bread and a clay cup. He gingerly set Father in a chair, handed Ames the food, and found a flask of wine to fill the cup with.

“What else did you dream?” asked Ames quietly. He tore a small piece off the loaf, and whispered his thanks to Hashem for the food.

“In my dream, the Followers of the Sun came, and they took you to Nimrod for judgment.”

Ames stood up angrily. “Let them all fall from the tower!” he snarled. “We thought the world would sit in confidence because of this tower. But

behold, Nimrod and his confidants are forcing us! This is nothing more than another of his schemes, to trap us in the net of his lies!”

“Sit down and eat, Ames,” Uriel scolded. “It is not respectful to our father that you become angry in his presence.” Ames sat down, and On came and sat with him. Uriel remained standing next to Father, in case he should need anything.

“I was also happy that you came,” father said quietly. “However, if you came to bring contention to my house, it is better that you leave.” He smiled, for the first time. “Do not think I am angry with you. It would have been better had we not agreed to come here. This tower is built for idolatry. It is no place for us.”

Ames was relieved. He had been afraid his father would disagree. “We still can return. If we left tomorrow by morning, they would think nothing more of us than carriers.” He stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Our fields are barren, but it is possible to seed them.”

“No,” Father said quietly. “We agreed to come. If we stop now, they will think of us as lazy.”

Ames’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Better to be a sinner in the eyes of man than in the eyes of Heaven.”

On drew a sharp breath. “The one who spills his load calls my father a sinner?” Uriel roared. He made as if to strike Ames, but Father held up a hand, and Uriel’s rage was contained.

“We are all sinners, if we follow after the Sun-Master,” Ames responded calmly. He sipped his wine. “I follow after my father, but my advice is that we leave.”

On, the quietest of the lot of them, finally spoke. “Why did we come at the beginning?”

It was Uriel who answered. “All humanity is served by unity. Even if most of them are idolaters, the few that remain are built by their togetherness.” He drew closer to Ames, looked him straight in the eye. “What has changed?”

Ames said nothing, but calmly finished his bread. On gave him a reassuring pat on the leg. Or maybe it was a restraining hand? With On, it was hard to tell.

Suddenly, the door burst open. Ames recognized the priest of the Sun that he had insulted earlier. With him were several soldiers.

“What you did today was not correct,” the priest intoned. “You will be taken before King Nimrod for judgment.”

Uriel said nothing, but drew his knife. On’s hand hovered over his sheath, unsure what to do. Ames stood up, a deep growl in his throat, and he slowly drew his knife. “The sons of Sheim are not slaves of Cham,” he said quietly.

The dark priest smiled cruelly. His white teeth drew a horrible contrast with his bare, blackened skin. “The world crowned him for a king.¹⁴ You have sinned against him by dropping your load. It did not belong to you, yet you lost it.” His eyes narrowed. “You *will* be taken to judgment.”

Uriel would have attacked right then, but Father called to him. “They are many to us. We should not all die.” He turned to the priest. “Know, slave of wood and stone, that if my son is not returned to me, I will lay a curse upon you. The curse of a son of Sheim is in the name of the *real* Lo-rd.” The black man’s smile faded to a scowl. Ames sheathed his knife, in deference to his father’s wishes. If need be, he could kill this priest after they left. He turned to the black man with as much dignity as he could muster. “And where is Nimrod, now?”

14.) *Sefer Hayashar*.

“At the bottom of the tower.”

Father stood up, slowly and with great difficulty. Uriel tried to help him, but he shrugged off his firstborn’s hand. He walked silently over to the black priest of the sun, until they were only a *tefach* apart. Ames would have smiled, if the situation weren’t so desperate. Even with his troubled breathing, even as he hobbled, father towered over this silly half-naked priest both physically and intellectually. “I and my sons shall go with you,” he said quietly. The priest was about to object, but he looked at Father’s grim face and thought better of it. Father looked at Uriel, who always seemed to know what Father was thinking. The eldest brother turned to his wife, and asked her to prepare a small list of supplies for the journey. He himself found his father’s walking staff, and handed it to him.

When all was ready, Father simply said, “We leave.”

~ PART II ~

The trip was long, and it took much longer with Father hobbling behind them. At first, every few hours he needed to rest, to sit down and breathe. They ate at these intervals, so as not to lose more time. But as they descended lower and lower, Father's health seemed to improve. He walked much further, and his step became more sure. They brothers speculated that the air at the top of the tower was hurting Father's lungs, and wondered whether they could resettle to the bottom.

About a week into the trip – it was on a Third Day, Ames remembered – Father demanded that they stop. The brothers didn't understand, and Father wouldn't explain himself, but he insisted that they be allowed to take a short detour alone. "You fear from the judgment of our king!" said the priest. "You intend to flee. It is forbidden to you to leave."

Father raised his voice loudly, although it strained him mightily to do so. "It is not within your domain to forbid us anything." Traffic in the area stopped, as people paused to see what was going on.

The priest looked around him. Although there were plenty of soldiers, and even more children of Cham and Yefes, the area was overwhelmingly populated with the sons of Sheim. If it came to a fight, he would lose, and he knew it. He turned back to Father, and waved his hands magnanimously, as if he were granting a favor to a disobedient child. "You disgrace us, but I will do you this *chessed*," he said pompously. "Only, you must return within two hours. And if you do not return, your lives are on your heads!"

Father chuckled at the priest, and led his children away. Though they had never known him to wander the tower, he clearly knew where he was going. Each time he arrived at an intersection, he thought for just a moment and then continued moving. It was only about ten minutes later

that he arrived at a wooden door, ornately carved and encrusted with jewels. On looked confused. Where was Father taking them?

Father clapped three times in front of the door, and waited. Finally, the door swung open, and a very old man smiled at them. In his smile was the warmth of lost ages, the calm of the days before the flood, when the world was like *Gan Eden*.¹⁵ It was also a smile of sadness, the sadness of seeing an entire world die. “Great-grandfather,” whispered Uriel reverently.

“Come in, my sons, come in,” the old man said to them. He limped¹⁶ over to a simple table, and poured them each a cup of water. It was well known that Noach refused to drink wine.

Ames was struck by the holiness of the place. Noach himself was a tower of greatness in a degenerate world, a prophet who heard the words of the Living G-d. Even his home had soaked in some of the *kedushah*.

They took the water with reverence, and drank it silently. It was almost a ritual, this water. Noach was showing them that he would give to them from what he had.

When they had all finished their cups, Noach smiled at them again. An unimaginable sense of ages past tore through Ames’s heart, and he hoped never to have to leave the presence of this great man. But the oldest man in the world merely said, “You do me honor by your coming.”

“You honor us by receiving us,” Father answered humbly.

“Is there a man in the world who would not see the face of his son?” Ames knew this was not true, for Noach himself had cursed Cham, had

15.) *Sanhedrin*, 108b. The last seven days before the *mabul* came were like the pleasure of *Gan Eden*.

16.) One time, while in the *teivah*, Noach was late to feed the lion. The lion maimed him for life. (Rashi, 7:23, *s.v. ach Noach*.)

thrice-cursed him as a slave. But then, maybe Great-Grandfather *had* retracted that curse, as Nimrod had implied.

Father explained what had happened to Ames, how he was being taken to Nimrod for judgment for the crime of losing a load of bricks. He told of the insult, that a Follower of the Sun should presume to order a son of Sheim to judgment. He told of his reservations about the whole tower project. At length, when the story was over, Noach sighed. “For what did you come to me?” he asked. “I will write you a letter, for Nimrod, and I will ask him to treat you with mercy. But he is wise; he will not punish you for this.”

“We came to ask our father a question,” Father said. “And to ask for a *berachah*, that we not suffer by the hands of these servants of darkness.”

“I will bless you. What is your question, my son?”

Father’s eyes pleaded for an answer. “Tell me, why did you come to this tower of evil?”

Again Noach sighed. He paused, poured himself more water. “All of us, why did we come? The world is better when there is *achdus*. This is not prophecy. I do not know if it was right to come or not. I am an old man. There is naught for me but to serve Hashem as far as I can see. I leave you room to disagree with me.”

“Who are we to disagree with the *Tzaddik*?” Father asked. He stood up to leave.

Noach took out a piece of parchment, quickly wrote a message for Nimrod. He handed it to father, and then included them all in his holy gaze. “May Hashem protect all my sons. And may He give you peace.” He escorted them out of his home, and they hurried back to the soldiers.

“You were late,” growled the Sun-priest.

Ames fingered his blade, and snarled at the idolater. “So shall the sons of Cham always wait upon the sons of Sheim.” They returned to the stairs and began to descend.

~ PART III ~

All in all, the trip took over three full weeks. It might have taken longer, but Father's health improved fantastically as they descended further. By the midpoint of their journey, he was almost his old self again. His breathing was regular, he did not need help to sit down or stand up, and his words had more force in them.

The priest had become more and more haughty, the further they descended. These levels were more densely populated by the sons of Cham, and his confidence, as well as his hatred, grew with each downward step. They were constantly passed by workers, traveling to the bottom to receive supplies, and people bringing food and other necessary goods to those in the lower levels. The granaries were higher than they were now, on the thirtieth level, where the vermin had not yet reached.

They finally arrived at the ground level, where they were marched outside into the farmlands and the kilns. They were brought to a kiln, where work seemed to have ground to a halt, as most of the workers were gathered in a dense circle around a single man holding a red brick in his hands. It was hard to see him through the crowd, but it seemed obvious that this was Nimrod. The party stopped at the outer rim of the circle of people, and waited for their turn.

Ames strained his ears to listen. He could only catch snippets, but from what he heard he understood that Nimrod was trying to explain something about stronger bricks. Or he was *demanding* stronger bricks. Or he was congratulating them on having made stronger bricks. At this distance, with so many people talking and pushing each other, who could tell for sure?

It was obvious that they would be waiting for a while, so Father gathered his three sons, and their wives, and spoke to them of the history of the world. It was not so difficult to piece together, he explained. Great-Grandfather Noach had spoken with Mesushelach, who had spoken with

Odom Harishon himself.¹⁷ The story of creation was simply too new to be contested. To suggest that Hashem was *not* a part of this world was not just wrong, it was idiocy. “We stood before the prophet Noach, who heard the speech of the Lo-rd. Is there room to worry that Hashem does not watch over us? These fools, today they are mighty, but tomorrow they will descend to the lowest depths.” Father raised his eyes to Ames. “We are responsible only to the will of Hashem, the true G-d.”

Eventually, the crowd of brick-makers dispersed, and the priest shoved his way to the front of the courtiers surrounding Nimrod. “All hail Nimrod, Master of the Sun, king of all men, scion of the great house of Cham!” he screamed, and bowed low.

Uriel and Ames glanced around themselves with a half-hidden smile. Did this pompous priest really feel such a need to prostrate himself before another of the “slave of slaves?” But nobody else was smiling. In fact, they looked rather angrily at Father, his sons, and their wives, who stood stock still and refused to even bend. Nimrod, himself seemed unconcerned.

On gasped, and quietly tugged at Uriel’s sleeve. Ames looked where he was pointing, but it seemed he was staring at Nimrod himself. What was so incredible about this son of Kush, that even his brother became so entranced? But then Ames understood. Nimrod’s tunic seemed at once to contain all the colors of the landscape. It was a beautiful piece of work. Animals of all sorts seemed portrayed on it, but as the cloak rippled, the scenes seemed to change. At one point Ames saw a plain, but when he looked again he was sure it was a jungle. Birds became cows became

17.) Odom lived for another 243 years after the birth of Mesushelach, which would have provided him ample time to personally convey his experiences of creation. Shes lived an additional 102 years after the death of Odom, as well. Mesushelach lived 600 years during the lifetime of Noach, and died in the *mabbul*. Indeed, Rav Avigdor Miller writes that these people *did* speak with each other, ensuring the chain of *mesorah* was as accurate and direct as possible. Thus, the *b’nei Sheim* who lived during the life of Noach merited to hear a third-hand account of creation, and a first-hand account of the *mabbul*.

foxes and lions, and Ames couldn't pin anything down. What was this cloak?

“It's Odom's *kesones or*,”¹⁸ On whispered, awestruck, and once On had said it, Ames knew it was true. This could be nothing else. Everyone knew it had been passed down to Noach before the flood, and that it was “missing” later on. It was no secret that Cham had stolen it, although of course nobody every accused him outright.¹⁹ But to see Nimrod wearing it openly was a slap in the face to Noach. Briefly, Ames considered demanding the cloak back, but he knew it would only make things worse for him. Still, Ames seethed inside. How could this, this *idolater*, dare to wear the cloak that Hashem had given to Odom? How could he show his face in public, proclaiming to all that his grandfather had stolen the holiest artifact in existence?

Nimrod caught them staring at him, and for the briefest moment, they saw his face contort with a fierce expression. Anger? Hatred? It was gone before Ames was even sure he had seen it. Nimrod was smiling at them now, welcoming them into his inner circle.

“Peace to the sons of Sheim,” Nimrod intoned.

“Peace to *all* the servants of Hashem,” Father answered. There was an embarrassed silence for a moment, but Nimrod's smile barely wavered. The priest took full advantage of the moment to present his case.

“My master, the king: your servant was near the top of the tower, and I saw this man,” he pointed to Ames, “throw his burden from the tower. Nothing was left of his load, except a few bricks.” He glared at Ames. “Not only that, but he also humiliated the Followers of the Sun. Now, what shall we do to this man?”

18.) When Odom and Chava were expelled from *Gan Eden*, Hashem clothed them in special “*kusnos or*” (3:21), which the Midrashim describe as having unusual properties.

19.) See *Pirkei D'rebbe Eliezer*, 24. Cham stole the *kesones* from Noach, and gave it to Nimrod.

Nimrod had maintained a polite silence during the priest's tirade. Even when he heard how Ames had made fun of his gods, his pleasant demeanor never changed. Now, he took his time in answering, making a show out of considering the case fairly.

He turned to Ames. "You threw off your load?"

"To save a man's soul. A certain man was descending the stairs designated for going up. I did not see him until I nearly knocked him from the tower, but I turned to the side, and he fell inward. Between this and that, my load fell from my hands."

"And you disgraced the sun god?"

"No," Ames said forcefully. Nimrod raised an eyebrow, and favored him with a look that said, *oh, really?*

"The G-d of the sun is the G-d of the moon, the G-d of winds, the G-d of all the whole world. This G-d I fear, and I would not speak evil of Him." He glared at the priest. "But this creature serves the sun itself. He is a fool, for the sun has no power."

The entire assemblage gasped. To insult Nimrod's god in front of him, to call him a fool by proxy, it was tantamount to signing your own death warrant. But Ames held Nimrod's gaze, refusing to look afraid. Nimrod merely chuckled, and nodded his head. "You said well, son of Sheim. But does the sun not light the entire earth, giving life to all?"

"Do you worship a hammer, for sending out sparks?"

Nimrod smiled again, and turned to the priest. "You see?" he asked. "There is no wisdom with these people. Thank you for bringing them to me." He turned to Ames. "You *did* throw away my bricks. You are responsible to pay me for it. And regarding that which you insulted this priest – he serves the sun, and the sun serves Hashem. Does he not, between this and that, also serve Hashem? *I request* of you, that you not

dispute with the remainder of the sons of Man, for the goal of all of us is brotherhood.” He turned back to the priest. “Leave me now.” The priest, much disappointed and confused, bowed away from his king, and left.

Nimrod waited for the priest to leave, and then turned back to Ames once more. “Know,” he began, “that this building is more important than any single soul. I know that it is forbidden to kill, and a king cannot reverse the decree of a greater king.”

Ames’s eyes narrowed to slits, but Nimrod kept talking.

“But if you had esteemed the building, it would not have entered your mind to endanger your load. A lack of a thought is not killing.”

Ames stared straight ahead, refusing to respond. He would not contradict the man who held their lives in his hand, but he would not agree to such an obvious rationalization, either.

Nimrod was waiting for him to respond, but Ames obstinately refused. He would *not* let this overgrown slave tell him the value of a human life. The moment stretched, as Nimrod tried to stare Ames down. The other returned his gaze with equal ferocity, and slowly, Nimrod’s face became a mask of rage. It dawned on Ames that he may have been experiencing the last moments of his life. Nimrod was more than capable of ordering the death of the entire family just to prove a point. Hadn’t he thrown Avraham²⁰ into a furnace because Avraham had challenged his idolatry, exactly as Ames was now challenging him? Everyone knew the story of the uppity youth who²¹ had challenged the authority of the great Nimrod, had been thrown into a furnace, and who came out with nary a scratch. He tried to tell himself to answer Nimrod’s lies, to agree with whatever

20.) For the purpose of this narrative, Avraham will always be referred to by his modified name, as some Rishonim consider the phrase, “Your name shall no longer be called Avram, and your name is Avraham” (17:5), to be a prohibition against referring to him by his previous name.

21.) In Ur Kasdim. See Rashi to 11:28, *s.v. al p’nei*.

Nimrod said, but he couldn't. What kind of creature would let a man die to save a worthless load of bricks?

Is this why I am called I-Shall-Die, because I shall kill my soul for the sake of a few words? He considered asking Father for the letter Noach had written them, but to look away from Nimrod was to admit defeat, and Ames refused to let this slave win. Nimrod was looking at him with unconcealed malice, and Ames wondered briefly if he should pray before he died.

Nimrod's countenance suddenly calmed. The smooth smile, the twinkling eyes were back, as he continued the conversation as if nothing had happened. "*In the eyes of my people,*" he asked, "do you not value the building of the tower?"²²

Ames understood. Nimrod was willing to let him off the hook, to let him go, but he needed to save face in front of his court. "In the eyes of his people," he could not allow a son of Sheim to insult him and live. But he had rephrased the question in such a way that Ames did not have to lie in order to answer. Even if it wasn't worth the death of another, that did not mean that the tower was not a worthy undertaking. Ames *did* value it. He could say so honestly, without compromising on the issue of human life.

But did he really value the tower? Hadn't he been arguing that very point with his family, before the accursed priest took him down here? He had felt then that the work was evil in the eyes of Hashem – but he had been angry with the priest, and by extension with Nimrod himself. Noach was still living in the tower, he reminded himself. Ames doubted he did any *real* work; he probably spent all his days fasting and repenting and trying to better himself. But his mere *presence* in the tower showed that, however personally unsure he was of Hashem's will, he was willing to publicly support the tower. Who was Ames to disagree? Wasn't the unity and brotherhood of all humanity a goal he could believe in? And

22.) See *Ha'amek Davar* to 23:11.

the tower did not have to remain in the hands of Nimrod forever. There were enough loyal sons of Sheim to stage a rebellion after the tower was completed. At least, Ames *hoped* there were, and that was close enough. Even if they didn't wrestle complete control of the tower from Nimrod's minions, they would almost certainly secure themselves the autonomy to raise their families to serve Hashem.

He looked straight at Nimrod. *The day will soon come when we will take that cloak from you, slave. But for now,* "I value the tower tremendously," he said, and meant it.

~ PART IV ~

“**T**oday, I stood before the *nachash*²³ himself,” Ames breathed, as Father, the brothers, and their wives walked back toward the tower.

Uriel said nothing. If Ames had shown just a bit of tact, they never would have gotten into that mess. His youngest brother was passionate, energetic, and proud, but he was also impetuous, confrontational, and just a little bit egotistical. Uriel loved him all the same, but he could not share the young man’s elation.

Still, as they circled around the tower to the farms for some food, he couldn’t help but be a little proud of how Ames, barely out of his youth, had put the slave king in his place. It was something they all wanted to do, on some level.

Uriel knew that Father was also proud of his youngest son. Maybe Father himself would have chosen a different path, but it was plain to see that he considered Ames to be fully justified in the way he had handled himself.

“This one is not the *nachash*,” Father corrected mildly. “The *nachash* was naught but a servant of Hashem. Nimrod is comparable to a bee; at the moment he stings, there is honey in his mouth. He rebels against the kingdom of Heaven.”

Uriel disagreed with his father, though of course he would never say so. Ames’s comparison was the better one. When a bee stung you, you knew it right away, and even if the stinger was dangerous, it could be removed. But a snake’s bite at first could feel like nothing. By the time you realized how bad it was, the venom had already gone to your heart.

23.) The serpent in *Gan Eden*, the original *yetzer hara*.

“You spoke like an *ish*,²⁴ Ames,” Father continued. “I was honored by your actions.”

Ames lowered his eyes. “My father’s image was before my eyes as I spoke,” he answered. “I said, ‘what would my father want from me?’ I could do nothing else.” Uriel snorted. Ames kept his own counsel at all times. It was not the image of his father that had prompted his actions, but his own sense of right and wrong. But he knew Ames was trying to be modest, not to flatter, so he said nothing.

Father, too, understood. “My image was before you? Were you not standing before Nimrod? I did not know that my image looked so black and ugly!”

Even On, who had said almost nothing since the trip began, had to chuckle at that. They came to a clearing at the edge of a small forest, where a small group of people could be seen jesting loudly. As they approached, the crowd began to disperse amidst hooting and guffaws. “Barren mule!”²⁵ “Your words bear no fruit!” “He does not concern himself with the public need. He says much, but does little.”

As the crowd dispersed, they got their first glimpse of the man so vilified. At first, he seemed not to notice them. His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, and they could barely make out his words as he spoke. Uriel looked around, but there was no one he could have been talking to.

“*Swallow, o Hashem. Split their tongues.*”²⁶

As soon as they realized that the man was praying, Father pulled them back out of range of hearing, but it turned out to be unnecessary. After

24.) See Rashi to *Bemidbar*, 13:3, *s.v. kulam anashim*, “Every ‘*anashim*’ in the Torah denotes importance.”

25.) *Bereishis Rabbah*, 38:6.

26.) *Pirkei D’rebbe Eliezer*, 24, says that thus Avraham *davened*. The phrase comes from *Tehillim*, 55:10.

uttering that one sentence, he opened his eyes, saw the four men, and behind them, two women, and smiled warmly.

The effect of his gaze was electric. Uriel didn't know how he was supposed to respond, nor could he begin to describe it. When they had gone to see Noach, the sense was of a man of unspeakable holiness, who had suffered through the death of a world, had sustained the entire universe of creatures that survived, who had been ridiculed for over a hundred years as he built his *teivah* and tried to warn the people, and how he had been so sad to be vindicated. But the simple curiosity of this man – how old was he? 45? 50? – it made an encounter with Noach seem almost like visiting a favorite uncle. It was certainly an experience, but it was *nothing* compared to this. It felt like this man could just *talk*, straight to Hashem, whenever he wanted, and that the affairs of the entire universe were insignificant next to the simple conversation of this one man.²⁷

Or maybe not. It was hard to tell. Was the man glowing? Or was that just in his mind? Maybe he would ask the man. Maybe he wouldn't say *anything*. Uriel wasn't sure he would be able to speak in any case. Who was this man, anyway?

The others seemed similarly speechless. For several minutes, the seven of them just stood there looking at each other, the family dumbstruck and the strange man curious. As time stretched, the man gave an inviting smile, and held out his hands in front of him. "I have no weapons," he said. There was just the hint of a friendly twinkle in his eyes. "Please, come close."

Uriel felt his legs moving, and he slowly drew near to the holy man.

"What is your name, *abba*?" the man asked.

"Ara'eh, holy one." Father responded.

27.) See Rashi to 24:42, *s.v. va'avo hayom*.

“I-Shall-See,” the man repeated. “Do you not see yet?”

Uriel was scandalized. How could his father, who must have been close to twice this man’s age, if not more, treat the young man before them as a superior? Yet he said nothing, for it was not his place to assert his father’s authority where he himself has clearly ceded it. Besides, he still didn’t think he could talk.

“What is it that I do not see, holy one?” Father asked.

The man smiled again. “I request of you, do not call me holy. Hashem is holy. We all of us are His servants.”

“And how is the master called?”

“My name,” the man said slowly, “is Avraham.”

Avraham! The day’s surprises would never end! This was the man who had defeated the ovens of Ur Kasdim, who had been imprisoned for ten years,²⁸ because he had challenged Nimrod publicly and smashed his father’s idols. This was the man who, without any *mesorah* at all, had intuited the existence of Hashem at the age of *three years old!*²⁹

A slow smile spread across Father’s face. Uriel hadn’t seen him so at peace since Mother had died twenty-two years ago. It was as in the mere presence of this man was enough to cure all of life’s troubles.

“And who are these?” Avraham asked.

“These are my children,” Father said proudly. He pointed to Uriel. “This is my firstborn, Uriel.”

28.) Bava Basra, 91a.

29.) *Sefer Hayashar* and *Midrash Hagadol*.

The man's eyes lit up, and he smiled again. Uriel got the feeling that this was a man who smiled easily and often. "Well, My-Light-Is-G-d. From your light, may we see *Elokim*."

They whispered *amen* together. Father pointed to his next son. "My second son, On. He has just been married."

Again the man's eyes lit up. "May your house be open for wayfarers, and may the dust of their feet never enter your tent.³⁰ On knit his brow in confusion, but, as was his custom, he said nothing. He only nodded, while father and the rest said *amen* out of respect.

Avraham's piercing gaze then turned to Ames. "My youngest," Father explained. "Today, he attacked the idolatry of Nimrod, and escaped unscathed."

"If so, you are a *tzaddik*," Avraham said seriously. "There is no room in the world for idolatry." Ames bowed his head humbly, blushing.

"His name," Father continued, "is Ames." Avraham's brow knit, as if he were confused, but he said nothing. "His mother died during his childbirth," Father explained, but Avraham didn't seem to listen. He finally blessed him. "May you see and speak pure truth."

Ames shuffled uncomfortably, but answered *amen*. They stood silent for a moment before Father spoke again. "Master, why did you say I do not see yet?"

The holy man's face became suddenly sad. "You praised your son when he challenged Nimrod. Why do you enslave yourself to him?"

Father suddenly looked at the ground.

30.) *Chessed* was the cornerstone of Avraham's *avodas Hashem*, so it makes sense that he would so bless a home. See Rashi, 18:4, *s.v. v'rachatzu ragleichem*, where Rashi tells us Avraham worried that his guests might worship the dust of their feet, so he asked them to wash their feet before entering his home.

“You knew that there is nothing in his mind but to make this a temple.” Father nodded. Avraham’s countenance again changed. It softened, filled with sympathy. “The ‘mighty trapper’³¹ caught you in his net, and now you serve him against your will. Know, my son, that even to Kayin, Hashem said, ‘if you improve, you will be forgiven.’³² There is still time to return!”

Uriel didn’t understand how such a short, direct speech could have been so powerful. But coming from this man, whose every word resonated with holiness and truth, it literally blew away all their rationalizations for their actions of the past two years. Ames had been right to demand that they leave, and they had all been wrong. Yet they refused to listen to him, until a young stranger came and told them the stark truth. Father was weeping, Uriel was stunned to see. Seeing his father crying like a baby was too much for him. He began to sob as well. From somewhere to his left, he heard On cry out, just once, but he couldn’t see through the tears.

“No,” Ames whispered quietly. Then, “No!” he screamed. “How can you speak to my Father this way? You were not born before his hundredth year!”

No, Uriel wanted to say. No, Ames, don’t speak to this holy man thus. He speaks the truth. But he could not stop sobbing.

Avraham’s calm voice responded to Ames without rancor. “You were the one who said, ‘Your idols are worthless.’ How can you join with such a man?”

“He is worthless, and his idols are less than worthless. But his tower is good!” Ames answered fiercely.

31.) The Torah calls Nimrod a *gibor tzayid* (10:9), a mighty hunter, or trapper. *Chazal* explain that he would “entrap” people with his sweet talk.

32.) 4:7.

“His tower is his,” Avraham said.

“Another few months, and it is finished, and his kingdom and idolatry disappear with it! We will take the tower from him, and we will kill him!” He took out his knife and sliced the top of a blade of grass. “Like that! He that rebelled against Hashem, he that worshipped idolatry, committed immorality, and shed blood will no longer trouble humanity!”

Uriel’s eyes began to clear, and he saw Avraham looking sadly at Ames. “Most of the builders are idolaters. If you kill them all, what good is there in an empty tower reaching to Heaven?”

“Come and find out,” Ames answered back.

Uriel was torn. His brother was a fool to speak this way to the holy man. But then, hadn’t Ames been the right one, all along? Hadn’t he argued against Nimrod, when Uriel had been silent, and been praised by Father and by Avraham? And then there was Noach, who, despite everything, was *still* in the tower. And though Avraham was right, that most of the people building the tower were idolaters, even amongst the sons of Shem, there were plenty who only intended to live in the tower.³³ He just didn’t know what to do.

Uriel looked back at Avraham, and was surprised to see that he, too, was crying. What did *he* have to cry about? But the holy man simply stood there. Finally, he whispered to Ames, “May your name guard you.” Without a hint of an explanation, he turned and disappeared into the forest.

Ames looked as if he had been slapped. “He cursed me,” Ames said in amazement. “He cursed me that I-Shall-Die. What does this mean, Father?”

33.) See footnote 3, above.

Father shook his head, tears still streaming down his face. “I don’t know, my son. I am not worthy to dream the dreams of this *tzaddik*. How can I know his thoughts?”

But Uriel knew Father too well to believe him. He could see in his father’s eyes the thought, *he that curses my son has no portion in my family’s business*. It was not a condemnation. Father simply could not choose to accept the holy man rejection of his son. He would not follow the word of Avraham against the entire world.

Father noticed Uriel watching him, and nodded. On picked up on the rapport between the two. Since he rarely spoke, he had become much more adept at picking up non-verbal communication. He may not have known what Father and Uriel were thinking, but he understood that they were coming to a decision. Ames, on the other hand, would miss it outright if nobody told him.

“We return to the tower?” Uriel asked Father. He phrased it as a question only to be polite.

“Yes,” Father responded calmly. “We return to our prison, and we hope that it will become a palace.”

