A NOTE ON THE FLOOD STORY IN THE LANGUAGE OF MAN

In his comprehensive assessment of “bold concordism”—the claim that today’s science is found in the opening chapter of Genesis—David Shatz discusses the notion of “dibbera Torah ki-leshon benei adam, the Torah speaks in the language of (the large majority of) human beings—and not in the language of scientists.”1 In this note, I would like to flesh out one form of “dibbera Torah” that he briefly cites2 and show how it might be applied to the apparently historical Flood story.

Shubert Spero had concluded that “The story of the Flood is a metaphor structured as an analogy to tell us about all the destructions and extinctions which occurred in the prehistoric past.”3 The principle that moved him towards this conclusion is straightforward: “dibbera Torah ki-leshon benei adam.” For Spero, this means that the Torah uses words and sentences for their descriptive content, and the literal meaning should be assumed unless it is untenable. With a little “stretching” of the terms used, he says, the Torah’s description of creation can fit with modern scientific discoveries. The Flood story allows for no such interpretation, he maintains, so it must be understood as a metaphor.

We are all familiar with the phrase “dibbera Torah ki-leshon benai adam.” Rishonim, primarily Rambam, used this Talmudic concept to deal with anthropomorphisms in the Torah that clearly violated the concept of God as a non-corporeal being. R. Joseph ibn Kaspi extended this principle to include other issues unrelated to the problem of anthropomorphism, to the Torah expressing things as they are believed or perceived by the masses and not necessarily as they were in actuality.

As R. Isadore Twersky explains:

[Ibn Kaspi] converts [dibbera Torah] from a pedagogic principle which provides a license for allegorical interpretation to an hermeneutical principle which provides a lesson in what we would call historicism. Many scriptural statements, covered by this plastic rubric, are seen as errors, superstitions, popular conceptions, local mores, folk beliefs, and customs (minhag bene adam), statements which reflect the assumptions or projections or behavioral patterns of the people involved rather than an abstract truth. In its Kaspian adaptation, the rabbinic dictum may then be paraphrased as follows: “The Torah expressed things as they were believed or perceived or practiced by the multitude and not as they were in actuality.” Leshon bene adam is not just a carefully calculated concession to certain shortcomings of the masses, that is, their inability to think abstractly, but a wholesale adoption of mass views and local customs. . . .

If one recognizes superstition and popular error, one is in a position to neutralize or eliminate them. The Torah did not endorse or validate these views; it merely recorded them and a proper philosophic sensibility will recognize them. . . . Leshon bene adam, which insists that the text be interpreted in accord with all rules of language as well as all realia, including folk beliefs, enables the exegete to sustain a literalist-contextual approach, thus obviating the need for excessive allegory and yet not doing violence to philosophic conviction. . . [Ibn Kaspi] proposes an alternate exegetic procedure, simple yet far-reaching, which will yield a literal understanding of the text without adding or emending or shuffling. This procedure combines exegetical naturalism—trying to understand everything in the context of ordinary experiences—and historicism—noting cultural realities, differences in manners, habits, geography, expression.4

How do every-day people make seemingly straightforward factual statements without necessarily meaning that the statement be taken as fact? As an example, let us say that in describing George Ploni, the late president of my shul, I say that he was a man of integrity. “Not only could he not tell a lie, but he could not tolerate presenting a false image.

When he had cut down his father’s cherry tree and realized that his father did not suspect him, he volunteered a confession without having been asked.” Every American fourth-grader will catch the allusion to President George Washington, but only an elementary school child would ask, “How tall was the tree that President Ploni had cut down?” Adults would realize that not only had President Ploni not felled a tree, but that I was not endorsing, validating, or challenging those claims about President Washington. I was merely using, for better or worse effect, a well-known story with an understanding that an adult with a proper sensibility will recognize for the literary allusion—leshon benei adam—that it was.

Literary allusions can be used in another clever educational way. To follow through on our example, let us imagine a late-eighteenth-century chauvinistic British educator, one convinced of Washington’s real duplicity, who is about to send off his nephew for a stay in the former colonies. He might tell him of the first American President who, when asked, could not deny that he had cut down his father’s cherry tree but who would not admit all the other damage he had done but which his father had not yet discovered. When his nephew hears the American version, we might well expect him to snicker at their inability to tell the whole truth about their first president. To be sure, the integrity of such a British version hinges on whether Washington really was an honest person. But, in any event, the use of a story is determined by how it was told by the multitude and not necessarily as it was in actuality.

We should be aware that leshon benei adam can even apply to numbers. If I say, “Many in Ploni’s family died early but he died after 87 years,” I am saying that he died at age 87 and not 97. However, we all recognize that if I say that he died after 120 years, I am not necessarily suggesting that he did not die at 97 but rather that he lived a long and full life. But what if I say that he died after 144 years? I seem to be making a claim that he actually died at the age of 144—that is, unless I live in a culture that speaks in units of dozens. In that case, saying that he lived a dozen dozen years is nothing more than saying he lived a good life, not an exaggerated number of years.

How to apply this understanding of dibbera Torah ki-leshon benei adam to the Flood story, becomes obvious when we consider the Gilgamesh Epic. As many by now know, Gilgamesh was the name of the hero of a tale well-known throughout Mesopotamia. There had been a devastating flood and one person and his family were saved. Gilgamesh, among his adventures, meets the hero who tells him the story of the flood. (The names used to describe the individual heroes might vary from locale to
locale, but the story remained substantially the same.) The hero, warned by one of the gods, gathered his family and many animals with him in a boat, rode out the storm, and, after releasing some birds to verify that the waters had subsided, exited and gave sacrificial thanks to the pagan gods who had saved him and his family. The biblical flood story follows the Gilgamesh Epic flood account point-by-point, and in the same order—although with some important differences.

Gary A. Rendsburg summarizes the current scholarship:

The Gilgamesh Epic was the literary classic of the ancient world, known beyond the bounds of the Mesopotamian homeland. . . . [Recent discoveries show] that at least some individuals in Late Bronze Age Canaan, at specifically a place that would become a major Israelite center during the Iron Age, could read the Gilgamesh Epic in its cuneiform original. . . . In short, the Gilgamesh Epic in general and the Mesopotamian flood tradition in particular were known in the Levant during the Late Bronze Age. Through such discoveries we can envision how an Early Iron Age Israelite would have gained knowledge of this great literary classic from the Tigris-Euphrates region to the east.5

(The Late Bronze Age is the late 2nd millennium BCE—from Joseph or Moses through the Judges. The Iron Age is the entire Period of the Monarchy.)

Is the Gilgamesh Epic of any relevance to the Torah student? The point by point concordance between the Gilgamesh Epic and the Biblical Flood story is either deliberate or purely coincidental, and the degree of agreement makes the latter untenable. Understanding the relationship between the Gilgamesh Epic and the biblical account of the Flood therefore becomes part of understanding Torah itself. Of course, it is not only we who have the luxury of hindsight who must wonder about the deliberate incorporation of a pagan epic into the Torah; it would surely be expected that the people of the time also pondered the question. After all, the literary classic was thereabouts and—as we know from our reading of the Tanakh itself—our ancestors were regretfully far from immune from interaction with the surrounding pagan culture.

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5 Gary A. Rendsburg, “The Biblical Flood Story in the Light of the Gilgamesh Flood Account,” in *Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria*, ed. Joseph Azize and Noel Weeks (Leuven 2007), pp. 115-127. Rendsberg argues that the fact that the biblical account as a unit so closely conforms to the Gilgamesh Epic counters the general academic view that the biblical version is a composition of two traditions, J and P—a mainstay claim of biblical critics.
This calls to mind Rambam’s observation:

Just as, according to what I have told you, the doctrines of the Sabians are remote from us today, the chronicles of those times are likewise hidden from us today. Hence if we knew them and were cognizant of the events that happened in those days, we would know in detail the reasons of many things mentioned in the Torah.⁶

On the simplest level, the Torah’s account of the Flood is part of its campaign against the pagan culture of the time. Despite the point by point convergence between the two stories, the differences between them are much more paramount and significant, as many have pointed out⁷ and need not be repeated here.

Now, while this may be very interesting, it is not clear how relevant it is. Paganism is long gone from the Jewish consciousness. One need not look past the text and its traditional commentators to know that the true God—unlike the false deities worshipped by the pagans—is moral and caring, that He brings judgment on the world, and has established a covenant with mankind in general and later with the Jewish people in particular. What then is to be gained from taking note of the Gilgamesh Epic in a Torah class?

There are at least two simple answers. First, if the Torah itself took note of the Epic—and a comparison of the two makes any other conclusion difficult—then we should take note of it. Second, it reminds us that

⁶ Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, III:50. Note also R. Herschel Schachter’s recent informal comments about how understanding the meaning of specific biblical words applies to the entire enterprise of understanding the *leshon benei adam* of the period: “A lot of the non-traditional commentary works on *peirush ha-milos*, and on *peshuto shel mikra*, which is very important. We’re not sure about the meaning of a great deal of Biblical words, and we follow the principle, ‘*kabel es ha-emes mimi she-omro.*’ If someone has a suggestion, we would be happy to listen—and some of the suggestions of the non-traditional scholars are *gevaldig!* . . . For instance, archaeology is discovering practices that existed years ago in the days of the Tanakh, and based on these findings, we can understand problematic verses in Tanakh. It is certainly a mitzvah to understand the *peshuto shel mikra*, and to know what the verse is talking about.” (“Torah is Not Just a Collection of *Dinim*: An Interview with Rav Herschel Schachter,” by Ari Lamm, Yeshiva University *Commentator* Newspaper, November 5, 2007.) Of course, R. Schachter was making a general statement and not necessarily referring to this or any other specific approach.

we are reading a Torah text that is neither allegorical nor historical, but *ki-leshon benei adam*, expressing things as they were discussed by the multitudes and not necessarily as they were in actual detail. This frees us from such questions as how did animals from frigid climates survive in the Mediterranean climate (let alone how they got there and back), and whether native Peruvian Indians and Australian aborigines are really descended from Noah himself. Needless to say, this approach no more suggests that there was no catastrophic flood than does the position that God has no physical limb claim that “He took us out with a mighty arm” is false and that we were never taken out of Egyptian slavery. It has no relevance to the secular debate on the historicity of the Bible. We are not talking about whether the Flood happened but the literary devices the Torah used to describe it.

This approach also allows us to see the numbers in the associated chronologies for the literary associations that they are. For example, Cassuto⁸ discusses the number seven, which we all recognize as an important biblical number, and the sexagesimal basis of numbers in this chronology. (We have vestiges of such a system in our retention of the Babylonian system of 60 minutes in an hour and 360 degrees in a full rotation.) A full life is 120 years (twice 60); an exceptionally blessed life is 127 (twice 60 with 7 added). Lemech lives 777 years. Enoch lives 365 years, the number of days in a solar year. Noah was 600 years at the time of the Flood. In the pagan version, Ziusudra (the Sumerian Noah) had reigned 36,000 years before the Flood.

We are surely struck by the fact that the ten individuals from Adam to Noah lived extraordinarily long lives. The Mesopotamian hero of the Flood likewise appears as the tenth in the list of antediluvian kings according to several traditions. In the Babylonian tradition, the ten ancients were kings—in part demi-gods who lived tens of thousands of years. The Torah uses the *leshon benei adam* of ten generations but demotes the ten to *people* who, while they lived extraordinarily long lives, were born, had children, and died. We do not hear this *peshuto shel mikra* without knowing how the nation entering and living in Canaan heard them, and we might therefore confuse the text with a chronology of the world. But the Torah understood how to undermine the common pagan parlance when

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first heard by the nascent Jewish community entering Canaan. Moreover, Providence now provided the cure before the illness struck. Just as science forces us to question the historical veracity of the numbers of the first few chapters of the Torah, the rediscovery of these texts makes us aware of the Humash’s *dibbera Torah* nature.

How should all this find its way into our educational system? To be sure, applying this understanding of *dibbera Torah* to the biblical Flood story can be confusing and may undermine a proper understanding of Humash if presented too early in a child’s educational career. But that is not the same thing as allowing a high school or college teacher to not be aware of it or not making it available when a student is ready to hear it. This relates not only to the biblical flood story, but also to the entire anti-pagan polemic of the first few chapters of the Torah. Humash classes in our high schools and tertiary yeshivot consist almost entirely of piling exegete after superexegete on verse after verse. Indeed, this should be the core of yeshiva study of Humash. But if it is all we offer—if we do not supplement it with literary analysis and archaeological information—we fall short of the mark that we should be setting for ourselves and our students.

In assuming that the Torah uses words and sentences for their descriptive content and that the literal meaning should be assumed unless it is untenable, Spero missed the point—that this is not the way every-day people speak. *Leshon benei adam* includes literary allusions, and that is the way the Torah framed its anti-pagan polemic. We may indeed ask how we are to differentiate between when we should take a statement literally and when we should treat it as a literary device. There are many subtle clues at our disposal, and learning to spot these is part of a good reading education. But certainly one cannot be sure about these judgments without knowledge of the literature involved. To recall one of the illustrative examples above, we know that, “he lived 97 years,” is to be taken literally and, “he lived 120 years,” is not necessarily literal, because we know the literary allusion to 120 years. We had no need for Ancient Near Eastern texts to know the great Torah message that the true God, in total contrast to pagan concepts of the world, created and guides the universe unchallenged and with a sense of morality. But now that we have these texts, we can better understand how the Torah spoke *ki-leshon benei adam* to teach these values to an emerging nation.

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*This also applies to the earlier sections of Genesis. It is for this reason that I believe Spero errs in further arguing that with a little “stretching” of the terms used, the Torah’s description of creation can be fit with modern scientific discoveries, most particularly punctuated evolution. All these attempts to show how the Torah text*
While one can lead a good Torah life without ever having heard of Gilgamesh, it seems to me that yeshiva educators would serve their students well by introducing some aspects of it into the high school curriculum. The Torah itself provides the model for this approach. Jews entering Canaan were sure to confront these tales, and the Torah guarantees the cure before the malady. How strange and non-enticing these pagan versions must have sounded against the backdrop of a well-learned Torah moral version of the flood story. When students have learned about Gilgamesh within a Torah environment, there is less chance of a negative reaction upon exposure to an anti-Torah interpretation of the same source material.

For some people, the simple idea of reading the Torah against the backdrop of pagan sources seems off-putting. After all, they might argue, the Torah is eternal and divine; what possible relevance could a pagan source have to its expression? But the whole notion of *dibbera Torah*—whatever its specific expression—means that the Torah uses current idioms to put across its eternal message. Generally, there is no need to examine the message’s initial construction as the ever-current interpretations of the text offered by Hazal make sure that the eternal meanings are understood. Here, however, there are at least two reasons to make the *dibbera Torah* form of the passages explicit. First, the pagan sources are now widely available and are often used to undermine belief in the divinity of the Torah text; second, a literal reading of the text—one uncalled for when we understand its *dibbera Torah* construction—is needlessly seen to be in troubling conflict with accepted scientific findings. The value of a *dibbera Torah* approach deserves serious consideration by yeshiva educators.

corresponds to the Big Bang theory, punctuated evolution, or the particle or wave theory explanation of light, are doomed to invite ridicule a generation from now as these scientific theories as well are transformed and revised, like all scientific theories are destined to be. Alas, these discussions often remind me of Samuel O. Trundell’s *A Wonderful Discovery in the Book of Job: Behemoth and Leviathan Found to Refer to the Stationary and Self-propelling Steam Engines of Our Day* (Philadelphia: Avil Printing Co., 1890). He wrote, “I am confident of having found the key to this most ancient and most extraordinary prophecy, and of being able to show that, far from being fabulous, these fiery monsters are in our very midst this day, full of life and power, and faithfully administering to our pleasures and daily wants” (p. 6). True, our knowledge about the Ancient Near East changes too, just as science. But our awareness of literature is a different type of thing.