

## The Earth Was Punished the Depth a Plow Penetrates — Three Tefochim for Disallowing the Possibility of Three Levels of Rectification

We read this week in parshas Noach (Bereishis 6, 11): **”ותשחת הארץ לפני האלקים ותמלא הארץ חמס, כי השחית כל בשר את דרכו על הארץ, ויאמר אלקים לנח קץ כל בשר בא לפני כי מלאה הארץ חמס מפניהם והנני משחיתם — And the earth had become corrupt before G—d; and the earth had become filled with robbery. And G—d saw the earth and behold it was corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. G—d said to Noah: “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with robbery through them; and behold, I am about to destroy them from the earth. Rashi comments, in the name of the Midrash (ibid. 13): **”את הארץ - עם הארץ, — שאף ג' טפחים של עומק המחרשה נימוחו ונטשטשו”** — the upper three tefochim, handbreadths, of the soil, corresponding to the depth that a plow's blade enters the soil, were also dissolved and washed away.**

The simple, straightforward meaning of the Midrash is that even the earth corrupted her natural ways. The Midrash (B.R. 28, 8) explains that when wheat was planted in the earth, the earth brought forth a species other than wheat. Of course, this seems odd and requires further explanation: (1) since the earth does not possess an evil inclination, why would it deviate from its natural behavior to bring forth a different species? (2) There is a basic principle that things do not transpire haphazardly or randomly; everything that transpires does so in accordance with a magnificent and grand scheme. Therefore, there must be a reason why HKB”H destroyed specifically the upper three tefochim of soil — no more, no less.

### A Tremendous Insight from the Chasam Sofer

To illuminate our path, we shall introduce the Chasam Sofer's commentary on this possuk. We will then expand on his commentary based on the sacred revelations of our teacher, the Arizal, in Shaar HaMitzvos (Ekev). The Arizal teaches us an essential lesson concerning the mundane act of eating. Man consumes food in order to elevate the holy sparks, “nitzotzos,” that are dispersed in the universe in the four following categories: **דומם** — inanimate seemingly lifeless objects, **צומח** — plant and vegetative life, **חי** — animal life, **מדבר** — mankind, or, literally, those with the capacity to speak.

The “inanimate” category, **”דומם”**, consists of all objects that are stationary and cannot change locations on their own — such as earth, rocks, water and salt. The next category, “plant life,” **”צומח”**, possesses a life — force and includes everything that has the ability to grow and thrive — such as trees, grass, plants and vegetation. The “animal” category, **”חי”**, possessing an even greater life — force, includes living creatures that possess the ability to move from place to place.

The highest category, man, **”מדבר”**, corresponds to human beings — whom HKB”H endowed with the power of speech. As the possuk states (Bereishis 2, 7): **”וינפח — באפיו נשמת חיים ויהי האדם לנפש חיה”** — **and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living being.** The Targum comments: **”והוות באדם לרוח — ממללא”** — the power of speech comes from the living soul that HKB”H, so to speak, blew into man's body. Due to the possession of a heavenly neshamah, this category represents the pinnacle of all creation.

Next, we must understand how these holy sparks are elevated from level to level in this hierarchy. Each category derives its nourishment from the category below it. How so? The plants and vegetation, “הצומח”, receive nourishment from the soil of the earth, “הדומם”; in this manner, the sparks and elements of the inanimate matter are incorporated into the “צומח” and become inseparable from it. Thus, the holy “nitzotzos” originating from the inanimate category are elevated and become an integral part of the plant category.

The animals, “החי”, feed off of the plants and their essence becomes inseparable and indistinguishable from that of the animals. Thus, the holy “nitzotzos” previously found in the “צומח” category are elevated to the category of animal – life, “החי”, and are integrated into this category.

Alas, man, “המדבר”, possessing the faculty of speech, is nourished by the meat and flesh of creatures in the animal category, “החי”. When he slaughters the kosher animal according to Torah guidelines, and consumes its meat after reciting a berachah, he incorporates the life – force and holy “nitzotzos” of the animal – which already contains that of the plant life and inanimate elements – into his being. As a result, when he learns Torah and serves Hashem, utilizing the strength and nourishment that he has received from these three lower categories of creation – the inanimate elements, the plant life and the animal life – he pleases Hashem by successfully elevating and rectifying all of the levels of holy sparks contained in creation.

Conversely, if man consumes meat from an animal and fails to serve Hashem with these additional resources, or even worse, if he utilizes these new resources to transgress the Will of Hashem, the opposite occurs. Not only does he fail to elevate and rectify these holy “nitzotzos” that have been incorporated into his being, he actually drags them down into the spiritual abyss – as the result of their participation in his transgression.

With this understanding of creation, the Arizal addresses the Gemoreh (Pesochim 49b): תניא רבי

אומר, עם הארץ אסור לאכול בשר, שנאמר זאת תורת הבהמה והעוף, כל העוסק בתורה מותר לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף, וכל שאינו עוסק בתורה אסור לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף – It was taught in a Baraita: Rabbi says: it is forbidden for an “am haaretz” to eat meat. For it is stated: “This is the Torah pertaining to the animal and the bird.” Whoever is occupied with the study of Torah is permitted to eat the meat of an animal or bird, but whoever is not occupied with the study of Torah is forbidden to eat the meat of an animal or bird. What is the connection between eating meat and engaging in Torah study?

Only a Torah scholar is permitted to eat meat, because he rectifies and elevates the holy sparks contained in the meat to please Hashem; he returns the “nitzotzos” to their holy origins. An “am haaretz,” on the other hand, who does not engage in Torah study – but rather occupies his time with the nonsensical whims of this world – is prohibited from consuming meat. For, rather than elevating the sparks of kedushah contained in the food, he drags them down to spiritual desolation.

### Three Who Ate at the Same Table Alludes to the Categories of החי והצומח והדומם

We find the following statement from the divine Tanna Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the Mishnah (Ovos 3, 3): רבי שמעון אומר, שלשה שאכלו על שלחן אחד, ולא אמרו עליו דברי תורה, כאלו אכלו מזבחי מתים, שנאמר (ישעיה כח ח) כי כל שלחנות מלאו קיא צואה בלי מקום, אבל שלשה שאכלו על שלחן אחד ואמרו עליו דברי תורה, כאלו אכלו משלחנו של מקום ברוך הוא, שנאמר (יחזקאל מא כב) וידבר אלי זה השלחן אשר לפני ה'.

“Rabbi Shimon states that three who ate together at the same table without discussing divrei Torah resemble those who have eaten from offerings of the deceased . . . ; however, three who ate together at the same table and discussed divrei Torah are likened to those who have eaten at the table of the Holy One Blessed is He . . .”

The sefer Be'er Mayim on the Pesach Haggadah brings a disquieting interpretation of this Mishnah in the name of the Ba'al Shem Tov, zy"l:

”אמר הבעש”ט זללה”ה, שלשה שאכלו על שלחן אחד ולא אמרו עליו דברי תורה כאילו אכלו מזבחי מתים, פירוש כי המת מתגלגל במאכל אדם כדי שיאמרו עליו דברי תורה, ועל ידי זה מחיה אותו המת שהיה בגלגול זה, אבל אם לא אמרו דברי תורה, אז הוא זובח אותו המת המגולגל במאכל זה ומשליך אותו לדומם, וזהו שאמר מזבחי מתים.”

According to the Ba'al Shem Tov, a deceased person reincarnates into human food, so that those consuming that food will discuss Torah issues over that meal. By doing so, they resurrect that deceased person. If, however, those participating in the meal fail to discuss Torah — related issues, they drive the deceased that is reincarnated in that food down to the level of inanimate matter. This is the meaning of the Mishnah's statement that they **“resemble those who have eaten from offerings of the deceased.”**

In the sefer *Yogel Yaakov* (Miketz), he adds an important point. The three eating together at the same table is an allusion to: החי, הצומח, הדומם — the inanimate, plant and animal elements that are always present at a Jew's table. For, when he eats the meat of an animal, he is, in fact, also consuming the holy “nitzotzos” of the inanimate elements and plant elements that were elevated and incorporated into that animal.

So, the purpose of clarifying and elevating all of the “nitzotzos” to the level of mankind, with the faculty of speech, is so that man will elevate them to Hashem by utilizing their nourishment to engage in Torah study. Consequently, if one does not speak divrei — Torah at one's table while dining, failing to put these added resources he has consumed to good use, he is effectively killing them and dragging them down to the spiritual abyss. He has taken them from a spiritual peak down to a spiritual depth; this is akin to eating from offerings of the deceased, “mizivchei meisim.”

It is worth noting one important point. Until now, these holy “nitzotzos” that were located in the three lower domains — החי, הצומח, הדומם — were incapable of uttering divrei — Torah or prayers to Hashem. After all, only mankind, המדבר, was endowed by HKB”H with the faculty of speech. So, until now, they could best be described by the possuk (Tehillim 39, 3): **”נאלמתי — I became mute with stillness, I was silent from the good; and my pain was intensified.** As the possuk describes, an existence without the capacity to engage in Torah study is intensely painful.

Once, however, they have been elevated to the level of המדבר, and have been fully incorporated into man's being, they gain the capacity to speak. Therefore, it is essential to take advantage of the very first opportunity after consuming these “nitzotzos” to speak divrei — Torah — allowing these “nitzotzos,” which were limited and mute until now, to fulfill their intended potential. Failing to do so, prevents these holy sparks from achieving spiritual elevation, and it is as if one is partaking of “zivchei meisim” — offerings of the deceased.

### **“Why Concern Yourself with the Merciful One's Hidden Agenda?”**

We can now begin to appreciate the insight provided us by the Chasam Sofer. The earth possesses the desire to give of herself and utilize her potential to bring forth plant — life and vegetation. Only in this manner, can the earth, which is part of the inanimate universe, הדומם, ultimately elevate and rectify herself to the classification of המדבר. As explained, when man consumes animal flesh, which has been nourished from vegetation, which have been nourished from the earth, the holy “nitzotzos” climb the spiritual ladder from the inanimate realm to the realm of mankind — he who is capable of speech, המדבר. All the more so, when man consumes plants and vegetables directly, the “nitzotzos” trapped in the inanimate world are released and transformed into the form of המדבר.

During the generation of the flood, "dor hamabul," however, all of creation had become corrupt, and there was no avenue for the holy "nitzotzos" trapped in the earth to elevate themselves to the level of **המדבר**. In fact, quite the opposite was true. Creation utilized the nourishment and resources available to corrupt their natural ways. As the earth became aware of this sad reality, she saw no purpose in producing nutritional grains. Rather, she ceased to contribute her resources, and instead of wheat produced only thorns.

Nevertheless, according to the Chasam Sofer, this refusal of the earth to contribute her resources properly still constituted an act of betrayal. As we know, Hashem commanded the earth during the process of creation (Bereishis 1, 11): **תְּרַשָּׂא הָאָרֶץ רֶשֶׁא עֵשֶׂב** "Let the earth sprout vegetation of plants bringing forth seed, trees of fruit yielding fruit. Although the earth's intentions were honorable and for the sake of Heaven — prompted by the widespread corruption that had consumed all of creation — nonetheless, she was dutifully bound to fulfill this original command and not to get involved in HKB"H's scheme.

In a similar vein, we have learned in the Gemoreh (Berochos 10a) that Chizkiyahu HaMelech perceived by divine inspiration that he would not beget righteous offspring; this prompted him not to marry. HKB"H sent the prophet Yeshayah to notify him that he was going to die, as punishment for this decision. Yeshayah delivered the following message: **בְּהַרְי כְּבִשֵׁי דְרַחֲמָנָא** "why do you concern yourself with the Merciful One's hidden agenda? You must do what you were commanded to do. This idea can be applied to the possuk here, as well: **כִּי מִלֵּאָה הָאָרֶץ חָמַס מִפְּנֵיהֶם** — the earth, herself, acted corruptly by not contributing her full resources to produce healthy vegetation. As a consequence, the earth was also punished: **וְהִנְנִי מִשְׁחִיתָם אֶת הָאָרֶץ** — as we learned from Rashi, the top three tefochim of soil were destroyed, corresponding to the depth of penetration of a plow's blade.

## Noach and Shem Could Have Rectified the Neshomos of Dor HaMabul

Grabbing onto our teacher, the Chasam Sofer's coattails, I would like to propose an additional explanation for why the earth's actions were unjustified. Had the earth, in fact, produced plants and vegetation for the sake of Heaven, as commanded, without being sidetracked by other considerations, the people of the generation of the flood could have been saved specifically by means of this vegetation.

First, let us present a concept revealed by the Arizal (Shaar HaMitzvos, Ekev). There are **Neshomos** of people who are so wicked, and whose transgressions are so numerous, that must reincarnate first into inanimate objects, subsequently into forms of vegetation, and finally into members of the animal kingdom. Ultimately, after undergoing these various stages of reincarnation, they can be completely rectified — by being assimilated and elevated once again to the level of **המדבר**.

Utilizing this concept, I believe that we can clarify a teaching of the Arizal's found in Shaar HaGilgulim (Introductions 4–5) brought in the name of the Tikunei Zohar (Tikun 32, 76b). He states that HKB"H may subject the soul of a sinner to three reincarnations but no more than that. If the sinner fails to remedy the offensive defects during these three reincarnations, he is beyond rectification. This is the message concealed in the possuk (**Shemos 21, 11**): **וְאִם שֶׁלֶשׁ אֱלֹהִים לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה לָהּ וַיִּצְאָה חַנּוּם אִין כֶּסֶף** — if he fails to perform these three on her behalf, she is set free without charge. Regarding this situation, Scriptures states (Vayikro 23, 30): **וְהִאֲבִדְתִּי אֶת הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִיא מִקֶּרֶב עַמָּה** — I will destroy that soul from among its people.

The Tikunei Zohar adds that this concept is also alluded to in the following possuk (Iyov 33, 29): **הֲיֵן כֹּל אֱלֹהִים יַעֲלֶה אֶל פְּעָמַיִם שֶׁלֶשׁ עִם גִּבּוֹר** — all of this, G-d does twice, thrice with man — i.e. HKB"H only allows the sinner three chances to correct his defects via reincarnation. Another allusion to this concept

is found in this possuk (Amos 2, 4): **“כה אמר ה' על — Thus said Hashem: For three transgressions of Yehudah I have looked away, but for four I will not pardon them. HKB"ח only reincarnates the sinner three times for his transgressions; a fourth time, however, לא — HKB"ח does not return him to this world.”**

Yet, the Arizal questions why we do, in fact, find that many evildoers reincarnate more than three times until they achieve rectification. He explains as follows:

**“אמנם אין זה, רק כאשר לא נתקנה כלל שום תיקון בשום פעם מאלו, אבל אם באיזה פעם מאלו השלשה התחילה לתקן קצת אינה נכרתת, אמנם יכולה לחזור ולהתקן אפילו עד אלף דור אם יצטרך. ולכן הראשון שלא תיקן כלל נקרא רשע. והאחרון שתיקן קצת נקרא צדיק, וכל מה שמתגלגל הולך ומשלים תיקונו.”**

The limitation to three reincarnations only applies if the sinner failed to make any amends at all during his three opportunities at “tikun”; however, if he made any inroads toward correcting his defects during any of the three reincarnations, he is not abandoned. In fact, he may return and continue his rectification process even up to one hundred generations, if necessary. The former who did not make any amends is referred to as evil, a rasha; the latter, who accomplished some degree of “tikun” is referred to as righteous, a tzaddik, and continues to reincarnate to complete the process.

We can amplify on this explanation based on the Arizal's own teachings elsewhere. We learned that some people are so wicked that they must reincarnate into each of the three lower categories of creation — **הדומם הצומח והחי** — before they merit elevating and reuniting with the ranks of mankind, **המדבר**. So, now, let us take a look at what the Arvei Nachal writes (Nitzovim, Drush 2):

**“הנה נתבאר קצת ענין הגלגול והוא חמור יותר מהגיהנם, וכמו שאמר האר"י ז"ל אילו היו יודעים בני אדם צער הגלגול כו', כי אפילו הגלגול הקרוב לתיקון שהוא במדרגת צאן הוא מר יותר מהגיהנם, כי כאשר הנשמה תתגלגל באדם אינה זוכרת כלל מה היה בראשונה, אבל**

**כשהנשמה בגלגול דומם צומח חי זוכרת מי היא, ושהיה תחלה אדם המהלך בקומה זקופה, ושעבשו היא מהלכת על ארבע ונהפך לצורת בהמה, וזה מר לה מאד יותר מהגיהנם.”**

He states that the process of reincarnation is much more difficult and bitter than Gehinom — even the highest forms of reincarnation that are closest to rectification. When a soul reincarnates into a human being, it does not recall its previous forms; however, when it reincarnates into the three lower categories of **חי דומם צומח**, it recalls that it was once a man walking upright, whereas now it has taken the form of an animal walking on all fours. This awareness is more devastating than the experience of Gehinom.

Now, we can suggest that when the Tikunei Zohar states that a sinner can only reincarnate three times, he is referring to a person who has sinned to such a degree that he is forced to reincarnate into each of the three lower forms of existence: (1) inanimate forms, (2) plant forms and (3) animal forms. Only after reincarnating into each of these three lower classifications can he reincarnate back into a human form. This is the reference in the possuk: **“הן כל אלה — יפעל אל פעמים שלש עם גבר” — all of this, G—d does twice, thrice with man.**

If after experiencing these three difficult levels of reincarnation, he still fails to amend and rectify his ways to even the slightest degree, this signifies that he lacks any connection with the realm of kedushah. Concerning this situation, the possuk states: **“והאבדתי — את הנפש ההיא מקרב עמה” — I will destroy that soul from among its people.** On the other hand, someone who has not transgressed to that degree, and does not need to reincarnate into the world of inanimate objects, can reincarnate as many times as necessary, correcting a little bit each time, until completing his “tikun.”

### **Three Handbreadths Corresponding to דומם צומח חי**

In this manner, let us rise to the occasion and clarify the words of the Chasam Sofer. He stated

that the earth did not behave appropriately when it withheld its vegetation from the wicked people of the "dor hamabul," because **בהרי כבשי דרחמנא למה** "בהרי כבשי דרחמנא למה" — the earth had no business getting involved in HKB"H's elusive plans. Certainly, the people of that generation were very corrupt; yet, the Torah testifies to the fact that Noach was a righteous man in his generation. Additionally, his son Malki Tzedek, the King of Shalem, was also a big tzaddik. We know that until after the flood, man was prohibited to eat meat; nonetheless, he consumed all forms of produce from the earth including all types of fruit.

It turns out, therefore, that had the earth produced wheat without deviating from its inherent nature, HKB"H would not have had to bring the flood to wipe out all of creation. Instead, they could have all died natural deaths; then HKB"H would have had them reincarnate into inanimate objects and subsequently be incorporated and elevated into forms of vegetation. Then, when Noach and his son Shem consumed the vegetation, they would have been able to rectify the **Neshomos** of that corrupt generation.

This explains very nicely the flow and connection between the pesukim: **ותשחת הארץ לפני האלקים** "ותשחת הארץ לפני האלקים" — as the Chasam Sofer comments, the earth behaved corruptly and defiantly brought forth thorns instead of wheat; **וירא אלקים את הארץ** "וירא אלקים את הארץ" — the Almighty saw that the earth deviated from her natural behavior and withheld her usual produce; **כי השחית כל בשר את דרכו על** "כי השחית כל בשר את דרכו על" — since all of creation was so corrupt, the earth reasoned that there was no purpose in bringing forth healthy produce; after all, that generation was incapable of elevating and rectifying the "nitzotzos" located in the inanimate and plant realms.

"וויאמר אלקים לנח קץ כל בשר בא לפני" — so, the Almighty informs Noach that He is forced to bring the flood and He cannot allow that generation to die by natural means; the reason being that: **כי מלאה הארץ**

— **חמס מפניהם** — even the earth has behaved corruptly and refused to bring forth wheat as commanded. Under the circumstances, it is impossible to rectify them by means of reincarnation into inanimate or plant forms. Consequently, **והנני משחיתם את הארץ** — I plan to destroy them along with the earth. Here Rashi comments: **את הארץ, עם הארץ, שאף ג' טפחים של** "את הארץ, עם הארץ, שאף ג' טפחים של" — **עומק המחרישה נימוחו ונטשטשו** — since the earth sinned and betrayed Hashem by not bringing forth vegetation as commanded, even the top three tefochim of soil were washed away.

It should now be clear to us why the earth was punished precisely to a depth of three tefochim — the depth of penetration of a plow's blade. It is plausible to suggest that HKB"H was teaching us a valuable lesson. In order to sprout and grow plants and other vegetation, the plow must penetrate the earth three tefochim, because the purpose of plowing and working the land — the inanimate domain, the **דומם** — is to elevate the holy "nitzotzos" located therein three levels: (1) from the inanimate domain to the plant domain, (2) from the plant domain to the animal domain and (3) from the animal domain to the domain of mankind, who possess the capacity to speak.

Therefore, had the earth considered the reason that HKB"H designed the plow to penetrate the earth precisely three tefochim, corresponding to the three spiritual elevations required to rise from the lowest category of creation, the **דומם** to the highest category **המדבר**, she would not have withheld her resources and refrained from bringing forth proper vegetation. In fact, she would have done just the opposite, she would have produced wheat so that Noach and Shem, his son, could afford the **Neshomos** that would have reincarnated into the plant realm, **הצומח**, their "tikun." Therefore, the earth was punished measure for measure: **ג' טפחים של עומק המחרישה** — specifically, the top three tefochim of soil were dissolved and washed away.