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בס"ד

Bene Ha'elohim

Before the Torah begins its description of man's evil that led to the Flood, it provides a short account of shocking sexual perversion and exploitation that was taking place on earth initiated by members of the celestial assembly. "When man began to multiply on earth, and daughters were born to them, the *bene ha'elohim* (literally, "sons of the gods") noted that the daughters of man were beautiful (כִּי טַבַּת הַנְּהָה) and took women for themselves from whomever they chose" (Gen. 6:1-2). Through such unions the *nefilim* were born, the "mighty men of ancient times, the men of renown" (v. 4). Placement of this passage immediately before the Flood narrative signifies that such behavior set the tone for and contributed to human immorality. G-d's creation was going awry. The world that He created as "very good" and had placed under man's dominion, was falling into disorder.

Mythological texts of the ancient world contain accounts of demigod-human cohabitation that begat extraordinary offspring with enormous strength who were part of human society on earth. Despite their being born of human mothers, many people believed such offspring were immortal. Beliefs of this sort seem to have penetrated into Israel. Accordingly, in its metaphor of the corrupted world that existed before the Flood, in the midst of the verses concerning the demigod-human cohabitation, the Torah made an important statement regarding these beings. Hashem decided that He was not going to allow His spirit to abide in mankind everlastingly; He declared that henceforth the extent of a human life was to be 120 years (Gen. 6:3). Thus, this passage contains several aspects of the Torah's anti-mythology position; all beings are under the dominion of the one G-d and the offspring of demigod-human cohabitation had been demoted in status.

Moreover, such beings belonged to ancient times; they

were swept away by the Flood.

Humankind had previously been expelled from the Garden of Eden and was precluded the opportunity to partake of the Tree of Life and live forever. The human offspring of the demigods may have been thought to be of a different nature than standard human children, but our text taught that G-d had made them mortal.

Many understand the phrase *bene ha'elohim* as referring to angels of G-d's celestial retinue or other beings from the heavenly sphere. There are a number of indications strongly supporting this interpretation. Biblical attestations of this phrase and of the similar terms *elim* and *bene elim* point in that direction as do the syntax and implications of our passage. In addition, the cognate expressions in contemporary Near Eastern literature are employed in that manner.

We must bear in mind that the word *elohim* in the ancient Near East was a plural form that referred to the polytheistic "gods," to idols, to spirits, as well as to angels. Despite the fact that the word still retained the latter meanings, it was appropriated by the Torah to be used in the singular in reference to the one G-d, to thus strengthen its monotheistic message. In this way the Torah proclaimed that all the gods and divine beings that people believed in did not exist as true gods or as independent powers; there was only one G-d, in control of all that existed, while all the other divine beings were His ministers or angels.

The word *bene*, literally "sons of," when used in a term such as *bene ha'elohim* or *bene elim*, means "members of the category of." An example of such usage is the case with the *bene hanebi'im*, who clearly were not literally the sons of the prophets but their followers, those who were part of a prophet's circle (1 Kgs. 20:35; 2 Kgs. 2, 3, 5, 7, 15). A more specific

meaning of *bene ha'elohim* could best be inferred from the various attestations of the term and similar terms in Tanakh.

In Job we read (twice), “And it was the day that the *bene ha'elohim* came to stand before Hashem, and *ha'satan* came among them” (Job 1:6, 2:1). This usage depicts some type of assembly of Hashem’s heavenly agents, subservient to Him, mirroring a human king’s council of ministers. When Hashem speaks to Job in another context, referring to a different heavenly setting, He parallels, “When the morning stars sing together” with “and all the *bene elohim* sing for joy” (38:7). After Nebuchadnezzar had the three men cast into the fiery furnace, he said that he saw four men walking about unharmed in the fire, the fourth in the appearance of a בַּר אֱלֹהִים (Dan. 3:25), Aramaic for *ben elohim*. Three verses later the king blesses G-d who had sent מַלְאָכָה, “His angel,” to save His servants (v. 28). In a Psalms proclamation of Hashem’s incomparability we read, “For who in the skies can measure up to Hashem,” which is paralleled with “can compare with Hashem among the *bene elim*?” (Ps. 89:7). Also see Exod.15:11; Ps. 29:1; Job 41:17.

In Psalm 82, in the same verse in which the word *elohim** is used in reference to G-d it is also used in reference to divine beings (*elohim*). It states, אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב בְּעֵדוּת קַדְשׁוֹ (“G-d stands in the assembly of G-d”), בְּקִרְבֵּן אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט (“in the midst of ‘divine beings’ He judges” v.1). As is clear from the continuation of the psalm, this verse refers to the all-important responsibility of human judges to rule righteously. When they do so, G-d’s presence is sensed to be in their midst; they are then called “the assembly of G-d” and, metaphorically, *elohim*, that is, divine beings. It is as if G-d is ruling through them.

However, that is not the case with the judges the psalmist is in contact with. He excoriates the latter for ruling perversely and favoring the wicked; they do not dispense justice to the poor and the orphan, they do not comprehend [the critical importance of righteous judgment] but go about in darkness (vv. 2-5). In the past, when he had thought of them as righteous dispensers of justice he had viewed them as אֱלֹהִים אֲתֵמְרָם וּבְנֵי עֲלִיוֹן כְּלָמָם (“you are divine beings and members of the [council of the] Most High” v. 6), but they have

shown themselves to be evil. Therefore, “you will die as plain men and fall as one of the officers” (v. 7). He had previously viewed them as divine beings but he now realizes they are corrupt. Of course he always knew they were mortal but he continues his metaphor with declaring that they will die as men. That they will “fall as one of the officers” implies that they will have a downfall as often is the case with corrupt officials and die in ignominy. In short, they will not conclude their lives with the dignity that would have been accorded them had they been righteous judges.

A close reading of our Genesis 6 passage indicates that the term *bene ha'elohim* is not referring to human beings. The contrast is drawn between *bene ha'elohim* and *benot ha'adam*. The former “saw” the “daughters of man,” that they were beautiful (פִּי טַבַּח הֵנָּה), a description of human women as a class, as something that requires a special statement. This points to a situation that is not in the natural order of things.

The early postbiblical sources, including the Septuagint, *Sefer Hayobelim*, *Sefer Hanokh* and Josephus, considered our *bene ha'elohim* passage to be speaking of celestial beings. Several rabbinic accounts in *aggadic* contexts that deal with fallen angels folklore also obviously interpreted *bene ha'elohim* as celestial beings. These include *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* (22), *Targum Jonathan* (on v. 4 of our chapter) and two Talmudic passages (*b. Nid.* 61a; *Yoma* 67b). Such a view was strongly condemned by Rabbi Shimon son of Yohai in *Genesis Rabbah* (26:5), but that statement may have been intended to prevent doctrinal confusion among those who would not grasp the Torah’s intention and might interpret it in an inappropriate manner. It should be noted that some of the outlandish extensions of the passage in apocryphal sources may very well have been heretical.

Most of the medieval commentators interpreted *bene ha'elohim* as “sons of the nobility” or as “members of the class of” the powerful and high-ranking strata of human society, or as the judges. These commentators did not have access to ancient Near Eastern literature and could not know and appreciate the Torah’s practice to counteract the popular mythology of the time. It surely appeared bizarre to them for the Torah to contain a statement referring to divine beings sexually interacting with human women and having

children with them, thus necessitating strained interpretations.

In his comments on this passage, the Ramban concludes that the divine beings explanation fits the context best but requires elaboration on the “secret” of this matter.

The term *nefilim* is possibly derived from “fallen” (*Targum Jonahtan*). They were thought to be the offspring of angels who were imagined in the supposed old world order to possess free will and breached the bounds between divine and human. In the only other Scriptural attestation of the word, the scouts Moses sent to Canaan are quoted saying that they saw there *הַנְּפִילִים מִן הַנְּפִילִים וְגו'*, “the *nefilim*, that is, the sons of Anaq, who derive from the *nefilim*, and we were in our eyes as grasshoppers and so were we in their eyes” (Num. 13:33). In that context the word is understood to refer to “giants,” but it appears to be a rhetorical expression, an exaggeration connected to their inordinate fear of the Canaanites or to their desire to persuade the nation not to proceed.

References to angels who may sin are sometimes attested in Tanakh as hyperbolic expressions to highlight a point: “On that day Hashem will punish the host of heaven in heaven...and the moon shall be embarrassed and the sun ashamed” (Isa. 24:21-23); “Shall a human be found just before G-d...Behold, in His servants He does not trust, among His angels He charges folly” (Job 4:17-18). In a case of minor to major inference, such as the latter verse is, “servants” refers to His heavenly ministers. In Isaiah’s description of the downfall of the king of Babylon, he employs a metaphor that apparently alludes to a fallen celestial being: “How are you fallen from heaven (*אֵיךְ (נִפְלֵיתָ מִשָּׁמַיִם הַיְלֵל בֶּן שָׁחַר*) O Shining One, son of Dawn,” (Isa. 14:12, NJPS, with a note: “A character in some lost myth”).

Onqelos, followed by Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, renders G-d’s resolution of limiting mankind to 120 years as a limit on allowing human life to continue on earth because of the perverse circumstances that had come to prevail in the world. In a manifestation of His patience, G-d granted humankind that period of time to correct itself before He would destroy it.

There are several problems with this interpretation. According to it, Hashem’s decree to destroy the world is cited in the midst of the verses that these commentators view as speaking of the sexual lust of the sons of the powerful and prestigious men, the elite few, before the Torah even mentioned the sinfulness of the masses! In addition, verses 5-7 clearly articulate the process of G-d’s deciding to blot out man from the earth, inconsistent with viewing verse 3 as having previously addressed this matter.

Finally, before mention of the 120-years decree, the Torah had stated that Noah was five hundred years of age when he began having children (5:32). Subsequently it states that he was six hundred years of age when the Flood was in effect (7:6). Had there been a period of 120 years before G-d implemented His decree, Noah would have been at least 620 years of age at the start of the Flood! The standard answer, citing *Seder Olam*, *אֵין מְקוּדָם וּמְאַחֵר בְּתוֹרָה*, that the Torah is not always in chronological order, namely, that the Flood was decreed from twenty years before Noah had children, is a strained interpretation.

Endnote

* When referring to G-d in non-Scriptural and non-ritual texts it is a traditional practice to avoid unnecessary pronunciation of His name by varying the manner in which it is written. Thus, when *elokim* refers to Him we will spell it with a “k” instead of an “h.”

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