

## The Holy Shepherds Pass the Baton

By Jonathan Jarashow

*In honor of the twenty-sixth yahrzeit of our son and constant inspiration, Noah Raphael, a”h, on 21 Kislev.*

*Please contribute to the Noah’s Spark Foundation in his memory:*

<https://go.thechesedfund.com/noahs-spark/noah-s-spark-foundation>

*Also, in honor of the yahrzeits of my parents:*

- *My father, Shmuel Zvi ben Binyamin, a”h, 22 Kislev*
- *My mother, Chaya bas Avraham Isaac, a”h, 22 Heshvan*

My recent visit to Poland with friends from my community in Wesley Hills has shaped my reflections during this difficult time of year for me and my family. With our son Noah’s yahrzeit approaching, the familiar annual sadness began a few weeks earlier than usual. I am not unique among those who have encountered the remnants of the death camps and internalized the immense weight of that experience. I cried with friends whose parents and grandparents lost entire families in the solemn, holy, and haunting places where we stood. Yet alongside the grief was an acute awareness of the cycle of Jewish history. I contemplated what was preserved, what was lost, and what responsibility falls to those who remain. I found myself thinking, as I often do, about Noah and the lineage behind his name, both our beloved son Noah and his biblical counterpart.

### **Seth שֵׁט, Noah נח, and the Meaning of Foundation**

At first glance, the Torah’s introduction of Seth שֵׁט seems understated. But when Chavah names him as the replacement for Hevel and the foundation of a renewed era (Genesis 4:25), his role becomes clearer. Seth is counted among the Seven Shepherds, a millennia-long relay of souls who carry and transmit the spiritual baton across generations. Chazal list them in Sukkah 52b: Adam, Seth, Methuselah (Chanoch as a possible alternate) Avraham, Yaakov, Moshe, and David. These shepherds nourish the world at its beginning, sustain Israel through history, and will rise again in the final redemption. Micah 5:4–5 speaks explicitly of these “seven shepherds and eight princes” who will stand with Israel at the end of days.

This list maps transmission, not necessarily personal stature. Chanoch is greater than his son Methuselah, yet he cannot pass the baton because he leaves the world prematurely (Genesis 5:24; Zohar I:37b). Methuselah, though less transcendent, lives long enough to secure continuity. Adam, Seth, and Methuselah stabilize creation at its foundation; Avraham, Yaakov, and Moshe forge Israel’s covenantal identity; David, the rejected stone who becomes king, will make kiddush at the future feast of Mashiach (Pesachim 119b).

## **Shem םש as Stabilizer and Teacher**

Although Shem is not formally one of the Seven Shepherds, he plays a parallel role. He is fortunate to overlap his great-grandchildren Ever, Avraham, and even Yaakov (Rashi to Genesis 25:7; Bereishis Rabbah 63:8), creating a living chain of transmission. Identified with Malki Tzedek (Nedarim 32b), he elevates the priesthood, confronts Nimrod (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 27), and prepares the spiritual ground for Avraham.

The earliest forefathers, Adam, Seth, Chanoch, and Methuselah, are planters rather than builders. They establish the spiritual soil in which future generations can grow. Lemech fails to nurture his son sufficiently, and so Methuselah steps in to name and guide Noah (Bereishis Rabbah 30:7), ensuring continuity. Noah repairs earlier deficiencies and becomes, in the Zohar's language (I:58a), a "new Adam."

Shem undergoes spiritual rebirth, becoming Malki Tzedek and elevating humanity's spiritual trajectory. Because Noah is born shortly after Seth's death, midrashic traditions see Noah as connected to Seth's soul-root, even as a gilgul that continues Seth's mission of reestablishing righteousness.

## **Seth – ש, Noah – נ, and Shem – םש: The Significance of Two-Letter Names**

Seth's two-letter Hebrew name, ש, appears simple, but Bereishis Rabbah describes him as the one upon whom all future righteous generations would stand. The Sforno explains that Seth's birth restored the world's moral and spiritual compass following Kayin's murderous violence. Seth – ש, Noah – נ, and Shem – םש thus represent the nuts and bolts of the architecture of spiritual history.

Noah understood this significance and gave his son Shem – םש a two-letter name as well, signaling continuity in purpose. Yet both Noah and Shem ultimately outgrow the simplicity of their names. Each undergoes a rebirth, a second beginning, and their greatness unfolds as they become fuller, elevated versions of themselves.

## **Cham, Nimrod, and the Ideological Opposition**

Opposite this lineage of holiness stands the line of Cham, culminating in Nimrod. Noah also gave his son Cham a two-letter Hebrew name, ח, which can carry positive meanings as Noah intended, yet it ultimately turned negative. Rashi describes Nimrod as a rebel against G-d. The Zohar (I:73a) teaches that he forced the yeshiva of Shem and Ever underground. Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer (ch. 26) identifies him with Amraphel, the one who cast Avraham into the furnace. Twice he challenges Avraham, and twice the ideology of self-worship collapses before righteousness.

Shem becomes Malki Tzedek, priest of the Most High, while Cham's descendants establish the earliest empires of domination. After Avraham's defeat of Amraphel, Shem blesses him, transferring spiritual authority. Cham's degradation of Noah reveals that he cannot carry the baton. This pattern echoes later in Yishmael and Yitzchak, Yaakov and Esav, and throughout Jewish history, gifted sons whose potential is immense, but who must be set aside to preserve the greatness and mission of the nation of Israel.

### **Rebirth and Renewal: Noah, Shem, Chanoch, Methuselah**

A recurring theme among them is rebirth and renewal. Noah "gives birth" to a renewed version of himself, "These are the generations of Noah: Noah" (Genesis 6:9; Rashi). Shem becomes Malki Tzedek. Chanoch becomes Metatron (Zohar I:37b; Targum Yonasan to Genesis 5:24), yet because he is taken prematurely, he cannot transmit. Methuselah sustains the world, delaying the Flood by seven days (Rashi to Genesis 7:4), yet he does not reshape it. The Seven Shepherds live lives that sustain life after their passing.

### **Noah and Chanoch: A Subtle Numerical Teaching**

Gematria adds a deeper layer.

Chanoch (חנך) = 84

Noah (נח) = 58

The difference is 26, the value of the Divine Name Y-H-V-H.

The Zohar (I:58a) reads the Torah's repeated "Chanoch walked with G-d" (Genesis 5:22, 24) as indicating he needed two measures of divine assistance. Noah, described once as "walking with G-d," required only one. Avraham rises higher still; G-d commands him, "Walk before Me" (Genesis 17:1). Rashi (Bereishis Rabbah 30:10) explains that he needed even less divine support.

### **Foundational Two-Letter Souls**

Before Israel emerges, the Torah highlights three early tzaddikim with simple, two-letter names. Seth ש, Noah נח, and Shem שם form a spiritual triad shaping humanity before the covenant with Avraham. Even the least prominent among them, Seth, is counted among the Seven Shepherds. Noah and Shem bear the heaviest burdens of rebuilding and transmitting spiritual order.

These figures do not transform their world dramatically, but they stabilize it. Seth restores Adam's spiritual stature. Noah, born circumcised (Sanhedrin 108b), preserves creation during its collapse. Shem elevates the priesthood and guides Avraham. Their minimalist names belie their foundational purpose.

## Continuity Across Generations

The enormous lifespans of these early figures create an overlapping chain of influence. Noah's 950 years and Shem's 600 overlap with Ever, Avraham, and Yaakov, forming a living mesh of transmission. Their names, שם, נח, שת, become the building blocks of Israel's spiritual vocabulary.

Seth's role is foundational and static. Noah and Shem consciously elevate themselves, becoming architects of preservation, rebuilding, and teaching. Some sources consider Noah a *gilgul* of Seth (Sefer HaGilgulim 22), further linking these generational roles. Methuselah shepherds Noah and Shem for centuries (Seder Olam Rabbah 1).

Some figures are great yet do not transmit. Chanoch is too transcendent; Methuselah sustains but does not shape; Lemech lacks greatness. G-d therefore "plants" Noah, a soul born with innate holiness, to preserve creation. Noah surpasses Chanoch; Avraham surpasses Noah. A repeated pattern emerges: a *tzaddik* completes his mission and then steps aside.

Noah is a pure *tzaddik* who walks with G-d. His drunken episode after the Flood does not diminish his mission. After preserving the world and transmitting his legacy to Shem, his task is complete. He has passed the baton to a worthy scion. Noah recedes after the Flood, recognizing that Shem must carry the baton.

Avraham later mirrors this pattern, withdrawing in his final years to learn Torah from his grandson Yaakov (Megillah 17a), celebrating the greatness emerging in the next generation. Shem is fortunate to witness this for the last fifty years of his life, as well.

## Shem, Ever, and the Birth of Avraham

Shem grows from a two-letter name into two identities, Shem and Malki Tzedek. Ever becomes his disciple. Together they form the spiritual womb from which Avraham emerges. Rav Kook teaches that their yeshiva is where Avraham's light is formed (Orot HaTeshuvah 5:7; Orot HaKodesh III). As Noah repairs the world after Adam, Avraham repairs it after Noah. His path becomes Israel's path. Generational overlaps shape destinies. Yaakov overlapped with Shem. Noah overlapped with Methuselah but not Chanoch. Avraham merited the presence of both Shem and Ever.

Survival does not guarantee continuity. Many Holocaust survivors lacked the stability or circumstances to transmit Torah. Their bodies survived, but their heritage was too shattered. Assimilation becomes a kind of silent holocaust. The same happened to families who fled Russia. Transmission is fragile. Shepherds must not only endure, but they

must also push forward. My family's departure from Russia in the 1880s mirrors this ancient relay. I am not the endpoint, but a bearer of the baton.

I am far from the spiritual level of these early tzaddikim. Still, perhaps I am meant to function like a תש, someone placed in the world for a specific purpose, asked to run a short segment of the relay and pass the baton with sincerity and competence. Their mission can become my mission: to preserve goodness, to refine what needs refinement, to rebuild what is broken, and to hand something meaningful forward. Some are born to pass the baton to someone greater. That, too, is holy work.

This truth crystallized for me after leaving Poland. The Seven Shepherds symbolize continuity rather than spectacle. Their greatness lies in the steadiness of transmission.

### **Why I Continue to Write**

It has now been twenty-six years since our beloved son, Noah Raphael, a"h, returned his pure soul to G-d. A quarter-century ago I wrote a book about him, *The Silent Psalms of Our Son*, and many essays since. Why do I continue? Because the baton still needs to be passed.

When Noah died, an immeasurably important part of us died with him. Judi and I had to undergo our own rebirth and find a way to keep building a family despite the immense pain.

After caring for Noah with such devotion, after holding him through illness and loss, Judi somehow found the strength to rebuild our family. She chose life. Because of that choice, our home is now filled with blessings that could not have existed otherwise. Every laugh and every milestone flows from her willingness to begin again when beginning again felt impossible. Our chain continues because she rebuilt what had been broken with love, resilience, and quiet heroism.

Thank G-d, we are so proud of our two-letter-named son, Don. I am confident that I have handed him a baton he will carry with even greater capability than I ever have. I feel the same way about all of our children, *Baruch HaShem*, and pray to be an able shepherd for them, for our grandchildren, and for generations yet to come.

The Torah tells us that when Yaakov's children tried to comfort him after Yosef's disappearance, he refused to be comforted. Grief for a child does not follow ordinary rules. Yaakov seeks tranquility (Genesis 37:1; Rashi), yet Providence draws him into exile. A shepherd descends with the flock, and G-d descends with Israel (Genesis 46:4). Here we see the quiet greatness of *tzaddikim*, whose hidden labor sustains generations.

Today I visited my Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Aharon Bina, who asked how I was managing as Noah's *yahrzeit* approached. He, too, has lost a son. He told me that he once asked Rav

David Abuchatzaira when he would finally get over his loss. Rav David answered, "When I die." This is exactly what Yaakov expressed. Anyone who has lost a child understands.

And that is why I write.

Yaakov later says, "I can die now," only after seeing that the tradition has been transmitted properly, that Yosef carries the Torah of the exile Israel will need.

In some measure, that is how I feel. As long as I can pass the baton, I will keep writing. The chain endures through steady, determined effort. Above all, I believe deeply in G-d, and my greatest desire is to walk with Him. As Hanoach did. As Noah did. As Abraham did. And as our Noah Raphael did.

May his memory be for a blessing.