

**FOR IN HIS DAYS THE EARTH WAS DIVIDED**  
**CLASSIC JEWISH SOURCES FOR**  
**A PHYSICAL DIVISION OF THE EARTH**

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Genesis 10 transmits the genealogical list of descendants of Noah. When it comes to the generation of Peleg, about 350 years after the Flood, the Bible reports, *For in his days the earth was divided* (Gen. 10:25; I Chron. 1:19). Owing to the juxtaposition in Genesis of this section with the following section on the Tower of Babel, Rashi in his commentary explains the term "*niflega* [divided]" as referring to the "dispersal" of the people around the world. Yet the actual term *niflega* literally means "split" or "cleaved" (see: Job 38:25; Isa. 30:25).

On the other hand, a far different perspective on the meaning of *niflega* has been offered: Many non-Jewish "Creationist" websites relate *niflega* to catastrophic plate tectonics (see below); a cataclysmic event that literally severed what had been a single land mass into separate continents.

The Tosafot Yom Tov, a commentary on the Mishna, indicates that if there no difference with regard to Jewish law between the explanation of a verse as given in the Talmud and one's own interpretation, then it is permissible to interpret biblical text according to one's understanding (Mishna Nazir 5:5).<sup>1</sup> I was curious to learn whether classic Jewish sources had ever dealt with this phenomenon. I now suggest that there is support in Jewish tradition for interpreting *niflega* as a physical division of the earth. This view is remarkable, for modern scientific evidence for this has been discovered only within the past 35 years.

#### CATASTROPHIC PLATE TECTONICS

Catastrophic plate tectonics, the idea that the continents have drifted apart, was first suggested in 1859 after a geologist noticed a jigsaw fit between the western coastline of Africa and the eastern coastline of South America. The theory that these continents had once been joined but had split and moved apart was recognized by the scientific community after the findings of the German meteorologist Alfred Wegener were published in 1915. Most scien-

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tists at that time felt this phenomenon took place over millions of years. However, many physical observations have been found to be incompatible with the idea of slow-and-gradual plate tectonics. A recent theory of catastrophic plate tectonics with extremely rapid formation of new ocean crust and magnetic reversals has been proposed and demonstrated in the past three decades.

What is relevant to our study of the biblical text is that a concomitant of the continental drift is the enormous flooding that occurs as the ocean floor warms during the melting of hot mantle rock on the ocean floor, as the rock expands, displacing sea water and forcing a dramatic rise in sea level.

#### CLASSIC JEWISH SOURCES FOR *NIFLEGA* AS A PHYSICAL EVENT

To begin with, when referring to nations (people), the Torah normally uses the term *nifredu* [branched out] (Gen. 10:5) or *vayifatz* [scattered] (11:8). But there is evidence in traditional Jewish sources that the term *niflega* refers to a geological phenomenon. Rashi, in his commentary on the Talmud (Shabbat 10b, d"h *she'yeshivata*), specifically indicates *nitpalgu ha'aratzot* [the land masses were split]. The *Torah Temimah* quoting the Seder Olam also uses the terminology *nitpalgu ha'aratzot*, as does the Rekanati on Deuteronomy 32:5. Indeed, both Targum Onkelos and Ibn Ezra translate *niflega* as "*hatzi* [divided in half]." Seforno indicates that the life span of people during Peleg's generation was halved as a result of a "change of air"; that is, something physical. Similarly, Rashi, in his commentary on I Chronicles 1:19, explains *niflega* as the life-span being halved, and *Derashot R. Ibn Shuaib* (Parashat Toldot Noah) explains *niflega* as "*shenitpazru bshinui avir* [they were dispersed by a change of air]."

#### JEWISH SOURCES ON A CATASTROPHIC FLOOD DURING THE GENERATION OF PELEG

As indicated above, catastrophic plate tectonics posits that massive flooding would have occurred as a result of the melting of hot mantle rock on the ocean floor. There are many classic Jewish sources for a massive flood during the time of Peleg. Among them are: Talmud Yerushalmi Shekalim 26a; Midrash Tanchuma Deuteronomy 32:8; Vayikra Rabbah Parasha 23; Yalkut Shimoni; Bereshit; Remez 5; Yalkut Shimoni, Amos, Remez 543 ("*she'hefitz*

*ha'yam et ha'olam*"); Midrash Tanchuma Chayei Sarah Siman 6; Yalkut Shimoni, Iyov, Remez 924 ("*she'alah ha'yam v'heyfitz ha'olam*" – literally, "the sea arose and **moved** the earth") with the Atlantic Ocean flooding what is now the Mediterranean Sea (Responsa B'tzel ha'Choma II Siman 12). Indeed, Bereshit Rabbah 38 referring to Genesis 11:8 (*vayifatz otam* – and they were scattered) writes: "*ein 'vayifatz' ela 'vayetzaf*" [scattered means flooded]."

#### CONCLUSION

There is ample evidence from classic Jewish sources, dating hundreds and even thousands of years before modern science conceived of catastrophic plate tectonics, that a geological event including a physical split of land masses may have occurred during the generation of Peleg and that this defines the term *niflega*.

#### NOTE

1. See: Moshe Sokolow, "Authority and validity: Why Tanakh requires interpretation, and what makes an interpretation legitimate?" *Meorot* 6:2 (2007) pp. 2-14.



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