בס"ד

FROM THE SHIURIM OF

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Noach: Lifespan

Delivered 15 October 2026

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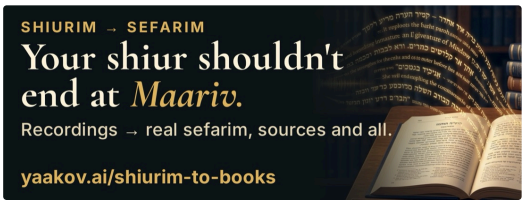
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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

If the Torah's early men really lived nine hundred years, why don't we — and what changed?

The question. Adam lived 930 years, Mesushelach 969, Noach 950 — ten generations measured in centuries. Then the numbers collapse: roughly 434 years until the Haflagah, roughly 200 after it, and by Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov only seventy or eighty. The Rishonim ask the obvious question: why did human lifespan diminish so drastically across four distinct eras?

The Rambam's view. The Rambam insists only these specific named individuals lived so long, through diet, conduct, or sheer miracle — everyone else around them lived seventy or eighty years, as always. He states that no other view can be tolerated, a notably strong formulation for one Rishon to use against another's position.

The Ramban's rebuttal. The Ramban reads the ages as real history: Adam's perfection diminished like a copy of a copy, the Mabul polluted the air and halved lifespans, the Haflagah's shifting climates halved them again, and Rashi adds that Avraham's era brought further weakness. The Ramban calls the Rambam's view "דברי רוח" — wind — and presses three sharp questions against it.

The Abarbanel's reconciliation. The Abarbanel defends both: diet truly mattered, but it meant total abstinence from meat, wine and excess marital relations, which most people knew yet refused out of indulgence, not ignorance. He answers Rabbeinu Nissim's challenge to the Ramban by explaining the Mabul ruined the produce itself, not the air, pushing mankind toward meat.

Where it lands. Longevity was never reward but necessity — Hashem needed centuries-long lives so mankind could slowly discover bread, language, writing. The Seforno and Malbim add that the world once had no seasons, prolonging life, until the Mabul introduced heat and cold. The Or HaChaim closes with a mashal: our days are jewels entrusted to be polished, and ours were reduced because the first generations squandered theirs.

◆ *Four Eras of Human Lifespan*

Trace the generations from Adam HaRishon and you watch something extraordinary unfold. Adam lived 930 years. Shais, 912. Enosh, 905. Kenan, 910. Mahalalel, 895. You look at that list and you think it's on a steady decline — and then comes the comeback: Yered, 962. Chanoch was taken early at 365. Mesushelach, 969. Lemech, 777. Noach, 950. Ten generations of lives measured in centuries.

After that, the numbers collapse. From Noach until the Dor HaFlagah the average lifespan runs somewhere around 430 years. After the Dor HaFlagah it falls again, to roughly 200. And by the time of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov we have arrived at the figure we live with — seventy years, eighty if a man is strong.

So there are, in effect, four eras of human life. The first ten generations, with an average of 857 years — the average is pulled down by Chanoch, who lived only 365. The second era, averaging 434 years. The third, about 200. And the fourth, our own, which is seventy or eighty. The question that has occupied the Rishonim is simple and enormous at once: **how do we account for the diminishing lifespan?** Why do we not live such long lives today?

◆ *The Rambam: Only These Men, and Only Because of How They Lived*

The father of this entire discussion, the ראשון שבדברים on the subject of human lifespan, is the Rambam in the Moreh Nevuchim, in chelek beis, perek mem zayin.[1] His position is startling. Regarding the duration of people's lives in those times — it is simply not the case that everyone lived that way. From the beginning of time until now, says the Rambam, the human race has lived seventy and eighty years. The 930 and the 912 and the 905 and the 962 belong only to those men, those specific individuals named in the Chumash. Everyone else around them was living ordinary lives of seventy, eighty, ninety years.

Why, then, did these particular people live so long? The Rambam offers three possible reasons. It was the food they ate. It was the manner in which they conducted their lives. Or it was simply a miracle — על דרך המופת. Picture it in our terms: they weren't eating red meat, they weren't drinking much, they were loading up on vegetables and fiber, nobody was smoking, maybe they were taking antioxidants, lots of flaxseed. Diet, conduct, or miracle. Those are the three.

And the Rambam does not leave room for an alternative. He writes that no other view can be tolerated. That is a strong formulation. Sometimes a man holds a position and considers the opposing position mistaken, yet tolerable. Here the Rambam says it is intolerable.

◆ *The Ramban: Carbon Copies and a Polluted World*

The Ramban, discussing the duration of human life, takes an entirely different road. The reason the Torah troubles itself to record how old each man was when he fathered children and how many years he lived afterward is that something real is being described about the human constitution itself.

Think of the old carbon copies — those purple sheets from elementary school, when they were first inventing copy machines. You get a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy, and by the twentieth generation every scratch, every line, every imperfection has accumulated. Adam HaRishon was fashioned by Hashem Himself. He was

the epitome of perfection — in his beauty, in his strength, in his stature, a perfect specimen. Adam and Chava produced copies, and the early copies were excellent. But a copy of a copy of a copy eventually goes haywire, and life no longer lasts as long. Even though it was decreed upon Adam that he would not live forever, he still possessed the physical perfection to live a very long time, and that perfection was transmitted downward in diminishing measure.

Then came the Mabul and the air was ruined. Where do people live longer — in Manhattan or in Wyoming? In a mountainous region with crystal-clear air, a man lives longer. The Mabul polluted the atmosphere, and the human lifespan dropped from an average of 857 years to an average of 434.

You will immediately object: what about Shem? Shem lived 600 years. Is he the exception that breaks the rule? He is not. Shem was born well before the Mabul. He carried within him the constitution of the first era of human history, and then he had to live through the ruined air afterward. Shem is the perfect example of a hybrid — created before the deluge, yet forced to breathe the world that came after it. Six hundred years is exactly what a hybrid should look like.

That era lasted until the Haflagah. At least in Bavel the air was steady; when mankind was dispersed, they were thrown into constantly changing climates. There is that old caution — you took a shower, your hair is wet, don't go outside. Is there any basis to it? Medically they tell us there isn't. Still, nobody wants to walk out into the cold straight from the heat. People go through Yom Tov, they haven't slept in three weeks, and then it's hot and then it's cold and they catch a cold. Whatever the science, the Ramban says that the drastic change of air that came with the dispersion further diminished human life, down to about 200 years. And in the days of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the age of man was reduced to what we see today, seventy and eighty years.

Then what of the Avos themselves? They were great tzaddikim, and יראת ה' תוסיף ימים — the fear of G-d adds days. That is precisely why Pharaoh was so astounded at the sight of Yaakov Avinu. Here stood a man of a hundred and thirty years. Pharaoh had never encountered anything like it — sixty years older than anyone he had ever seen in his life.

So the Ramban constructs four epochs: from Adam until the Mabul, the prime of mankind, 857 years; then the איפוש האויר, the corruption of the air through the Mabul, bringing life down to about 400; then the dispersion of the Dor HaFlagah with its changing climates, bringing it to about 200. What the Ramban does not explain is the fourth epoch — why it fell from 200 to seventy.

That gap Rashi fills in. Rashi comments that in the days of Avraham the years were shortened — בימי אברהם נתמעטו השנים — because בתשוש כחו של עולם, weakness entered the world. Perhaps we can suggest that Avraham Avinu ushered in the era of Torah. The first two thousand years of world history were תוהו; Avraham was born in 1948, and the era of Torah began in his lifetime. Torah מתשת כחו של אדם — Torah weakens a man's strength, and perhaps that introduced a certain weakness into the world. Rashi adds that you

can see this from the ten generations from Noach until Avraham, who began fathering children at sixty and seventy, something never seen before.

◆ *The Ramban's Three Questions on the Rambam*

On the Rambam's position — that only these individuals lived long lives while everyone else lived seventy or eighty years — the Ramban is unsparing. The Rambam wrote that no other view may be tolerated; the Ramban responds that the Rambam's own words are הנה אלה דברי רוח, nothing but wind.

His first question concerns the miracle. Why would these particular men merit a miracle that no one else received? You will say they were righteous. Says who? What do we actually know about them? Shais — we have no information. Enosh — in his days people began serving avodah zarah. Kenan, Mahalalel, Yered — we know nothing. Chanoch, who walked with G-d, died young. It cannot be that precisely the men who happen to be listed in the Chumash were the recipients of a private miracle.

Second, if it was diet — diet does not do that. You can eat all the antioxidants in the world; you can consume Greek yogurt by the barrel; you can have someone funnel fish oil down your throat for hours; you can hook yourself up to a fish oil IV. It is not going to extend your life by nine hundred years. How can food possibly account for a man living centuries longer than his neighbor?

Third, if their diet really was extending life to such a degree, why didn't anyone else catch on? This is the most obvious thing in the world to notice. One population is dying at seventy and eighty, and there is a man who lives to six hundred, seven hundred, nine hundred — and nobody ever sees him eat a steak; all he eats is broccoli sprouts. Maybe give the broccoli a try. Give the cauliflower a try. And there is a fourth wrinkle in the same question: what happened in the times of Noach? Was there a diet book that said, read this and live nine hundred years, and then it was suddenly lost? Why would the knowledge have simply vanished?

◆ *A Digression: Who Was the Oldest Person Who Ever Lived?*

There is a popular expression about living the life of Mesushelach. He lived 969 years — which, incidentally, is even longer than the Shabbos HaGadol drashah. But was Mesushelach in fact the oldest person who ever lived? The answer is no.

I am not speaking here about those who never died at all, and I am not interested in what someone might have lived had he not given years away. I want to know who actually lived a longer life than Mesushelach. And the answer — and almost nobody knows this — is Noach's wife.

Her name was Naamah. Consider the pesukim: Lemech took two wives, and Tzilah bore Tuval Kayin, ואחות תובל קין נעמה — and the sister of Tuval Kayin was Naamah. Only afterward does the Torah record that Adam HaRishon lived with Chavah and she bore Shais. Which means Naamah was already born before Shais was. The Medrash also states explicitly that the wives of Lemech separated from him after he killed Kayin and Tuval Kayin — and Tuval Kayin is already Naamah's brother. So Naamah was born before the year 130, the year in which Shais was born. And she came out of the teivah. The Mabul was in the year 1656. Which makes this woman a minimum of 1,526 years old.

When Noach stepped off the teivah he presumably told her she looked just as good as the day he married her. You don't look a day over 1,200. And it goes to show that one can build a בית נאמן even when the girl is a bit older. So the oldest person who ever lived is Naamah eishes Noach — at a bare minimum 1,526. She may well have been older, but on the shidduch resume she wrote 1,526.

◆ *The Abarbanel Enters: Measure for Measure Between Rishonim*

Now comes the remarkable approach of the Abarbanel, who sets out to reconcile the two views.

He begins by confronting the raw implausibility of the numbers. At first glance it seems unbelievable that human beings could live so long, and he brings the secular sages who propose that the years recorded in the Chumash are not our years at all — that they are lunar cycles, meaning months. On that reading Adam did not live 930 years but 930 months, which is no remarkable lifespan at all. The Abarbanel demolishes it. If Mahalalel fathered a child at sixty-two of those "years," he was five years old when he became a father. If Chanoch had Mesushelach at sixty-five, he was five and a half. The theory collapses on its own arithmetic.

The Abarbanel then presents the Rambam's view and the Ramban's three questions upon it — and here he says something unbelievable. The way a person deals with others is the way he himself is dealt with. The Ramban so vociferously rejected the Rambam, dismissing him with three questions and calling his words wind. And so it happened that the Ramban's own talmid's talmid, Rabbeinu Nissim, came and dismissed the Ramban. מאן דקפיד קפדין בהדיה — one who is exacting with others, others are exacting with him. The Ramban wiped his hands of the Rambam; the measure came back to him through his own student's student.

◆ *Rabbeinu Nissim's Challenge to the Ramban*

What is the question? The Ramban built his second epoch on the claim that the Mabul polluted the air. Rabbeinu Nissim presses: how exactly does rain pollute the air?

Take it either way. If the Mabul was a miraculous process — Hashem was angry with the world and brought the flood — the Torah then tells us that Hashem was consoled, that He relented. In that case the lifespan

should have reverted to what it had been. Nothing in the atmosphere actually changed; it was divine anger, and the anger passed. So why did man's life not return to its former length?

And if it was a natural process, the argument runs in the opposite direction. Rain cleans the air. Everyone knows the atmosphere is clearer after a storm. You have an oppressive day in August, humid and muggy and unbearable, and a few days later it is seventy degrees — what happened? It rained. The air improves from rain; it does not deteriorate. So מה נפשך: if the Mabul was miraculous, Hashem should have restored their lifespan when His anger passed; and if it was natural, the rain should have cleared the air, not ruined it.

◆ *The Abarbanel's Defense of the Rambam*

The Abarbanel's conclusion is that both Rishonim are right. His closing words are שניים כאחד טובים ואלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים — both together are good, and these and these are the words of the living G-d. And of course they are both the words of the living G-d, because he has rescued both of them with his own additions. All the Ramban's questions on the Rambam, he says, אינם כלום — they amount to nothing. But at the same time, the Ramban's explanation for the long duration of life is also precious and beloved to him.

How does he save the Rambam? Very simply: it is true that diet extended their lives, but not the trivial diet we imagined. Adam did not eat meat. Meat and wine were not consumed until the times of Noach. They were vegetarians; they ate plants and herbs. They drank water. No wine, no dyes, no coloring, no aspartame — just water and soluble fiber. And everyone knows medically that the simpler the food and the closer it is to nature, the healthier it is; the more complex the food, the more trouble it causes. That is the Abarbanel writing over five hundred years ago, and it is still true today.

The Abarbanel adds a second element: excessive marital relations shorten a man's life. This is brought in the Gemara and it is brought in Shulchan Aruch — it is a matter of halacha, not merely of medicine. In the early generations they did not pursue this excessively. They did not have children until well past a hundred years of age; they did not approach their wives until very advanced ages, which is precisely why the Torah records that each man was a hundred and some years old when he fathered his firstborn. And what was happening until then? Nothing was happening until then.

Where did they learn it? From Adam HaRishon. Adam lived with his wife on the first day, and look what came of it — it brought death into the world. So Adam said: we are taking a break. And he separated for a hundred and thirty years. The later generations learned from him. This is why Shulchan Aruch records that 999 die from this cause — I am not taking questions on the number; that is what is written there.

And now the Ramban's third question answers itself. Why didn't anyone else pick up on the longevity program? **They knew exactly what the longevity program was. They simply didn't want it.** It was too painful. It demanded too much discipline. I once heard two men talking. One said, you know, if you give up

donuts entirely you could add ten years to your life. The other answered: I would rather live ten years less and eat donuts. I don't want to live ten more years without donuts. That is an elementary way of describing what was happening at the beginning of the world. A handful of select individuals maintained an extraordinarily disciplined regimen in eating, in drinking, in their relations — eating only when genuinely hungry — and the rest of the world could not bring itself to develop that discipline. The generations became immersed in food, in drink, in indulgence, and their lives grew short.

◆ *Why Hashem Needed Certain Men to Live for Centuries*

That leaves the Ramban's first question: why would precisely these individuals merit a miracle? Here the Abarbanel's answer is magnificent, and it must be heard carefully. The miracle was not a reward.

The Ribono Shel Olam says, as it were: I am not rewarding them. I require, for the sake of mankind itself, that certain people live very long lives. Notice that when the Torah recounts these lifespans, it simultaneously records the things these generations developed and invented — music, tools, implements of the field.

We live in an era in which a person is born into the accumulated discoveries of all who preceded him. All we must do is take that inheritance and push it a little further. But in the earliest days, had Hashem not permitted certain individuals to live for centuries, who would ever have discovered how to make bread? Have you ever stopped to wonder at the sheer improbability of bread? You plant something; wheat grows; it takes a year. Now — let's destroy it. Who ever conceived of grinding it into powder? Here is this beautiful thing that took a full year to grow, and the idea is to pulverize it. And then, having pulverized it: let's mix it with water. And then, having mixed it with water: let's set it on fire. **You need to be in this world a very long time to arrive at the idea of making bread.**

That is exactly why Hashem had to keep certain people alive for hundreds of years. Had one man not been around for centuries, they would never have invented bread. They would never have invented language. There would have been no pens, no paper. All of it required select individuals granted extraordinary longevity — not as a reward, says the Abarbanel, but for the progress of mankind. It took hundreds of years of trial until a man finally stood there with this thing that grows out of the ground and said: I'll bang it on the floor, I'll throw it in the air, I'll jump on it — let me grind it up. And now what? I could throw it behind me, I could bang it off the wall, I could put it in the fire. No — let me mix it with water. After nine hundred years, the man finally had challah.

So according to the Abarbanel, the diet did in fact contribute, in an entirely logical way, to their long lives; only select individuals were willing to observe it; and the rest of the world preferred indulgence over discipline. That answers all of the Ramban's questions on the Rambam.

◆ *The Abarbanel's Defense of the Ramban*

Yet the Abarbanel insists that the Ramban's approach is equally true, equally logical, equally reasonable. In Parashas Haazinu, on the words זכור ימות עולם, the Abarbanel in fact leans primarily on the Ramban's explanation — that the earlier generations lived longer because they were more directly the handiwork of Hashem, and therefore their physical constitution was more perfect than that of later generations.

But now he must answer Rabbeinu Nissim. Why would the Mabul have ruined the atmosphere? The Abarbanel reframes what the Ramban meant. The point is not that the air itself became toxic. The point is that part of why they lived so long was their diet of plants and vegetables — and what the Mabul did was saturate the earth and ruin its produce. The boiling waters penetrated the ground to the depth of three tefachim. The Abarbanel says more than that: the Mabul made the air heavy and humid and the earth waterlogged, and everything that grew came up soaked and sodden.

I would add — and this is my own suggestion, he does not explain the mechanism — that it works the way we understand nutrition today, where boiling vegetables leaches out their nutrients and you are better off eating them raw. In any case the result is plain enough. It is one thing to eat good vegetables; it is another thing entirely to eat ruined ones. It is one thing to have a fresh salad; it is another to have it soggy. There is nothing worse than soggy lettuce. If you want me to be healthy, at least let me have the crunch. But three-day-old waterlogged salad? They said: forget the salad. And they turned to meat. The Mabul, in other words, made mankind carnivorous, and that is how it shortened human life.

So the Abarbanel identifies three primary causes of the decline. One, that as the generations grew more distant from Adam HaRishon they lost more of the original perfected constitution. Two, that the earth itself became נתקלקל — the ground was dissolved and the plants ruined. Three, that men consequently consumed more meat. For all of these reasons human life grew short.

And so both approaches stand: אלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים. They lived longer because of how they ate and how they lived; and their lifespans contracted because of real phenomena that overtook the world across the generations.

◆ *The Seasons, and a Modern Echo*

There is a further explanation offered by the Seforno in Parashas Noach and by the Malbim in Parashas Noach. Originally, when Hashem created the world, the circuit of the sun ran directly along the equator. Today it sits at an angle of some twenty-three degrees — which is what produces the seasons. Strictly speaking it is the earth that tilts and moves; these Mefarshim are describing it from the vantage point of where the light arrives, but the phenomenon is the same.

Had the circuit remained perfect, there would be no seasons at all, and the entire world would be San Diego — sunny and seventy degrees the year round. This is precisely why, at the conclusion of the Mabul, Hashem declares that the seasons will never again cease, that summer and winter will not be abolished. Why is that stated specifically in connection with the Mabul? Because until the Mabul there were no seasons to speak of; the year was balmy and beautiful from end to end. With weather like that, a man lives far longer. Once frigid cold and oppressive heat entered the world, says the Seforno and says the Malbim, human life was shortened.

The idea I developed above — that long life was required so that mankind could learn — I first heard from Rav Avigdor Miller, and I bring it here from his sefer on Bereishis, called In the Beginning. He writes that the original long lifespan was especially necessary at the beginning: man needed long years of personal experience in order to learn and perfect the skills that mankind would need, skills impossible to develop within a brief lifetime. In the generations from Adam to Noach, he writes, very many artifices and processes were invented which might never have been achieved had their lives been brief, and it is certain that social usages and traditions of proper behavior were created as well. We today are unaware of how much we owe to those first ten generations.

◆ *The Or HaChaim: A King, His Jewels, and Our Days*

We will close with the Or HaChaim HaKadosh in Parashas Vayechi, who also confronts the dramatic diminution of human life and answers it with a mashal.

There was a king who possessed precious stones, and he desired that they be chiseled and polished and cut into the most magnificent treasures imaginable. He distributed them to his workers — hundreds of thousands of stones to each man, three hundred thousand to one, a hundred and fifty thousand to another — and he allotted them time to do the work. When the appointed time came and the king returned, he found that nothing had been done. The stones had grown filthy, they were chipped, they were being ruined. So the king took back all the stones, and to the children of those workers he gave only a small quantity to polish and to shine and to fashion into treasures.

The king, says the Or HaChaim, is מלך ישראל אלקי עולם, the Holy One blessed be He. The stones are our neshamah. And where do we find the neshamah called a stone? From the pasuk משם רועה אבן ישראל. And our neshamah is composed of our days. ישראל בא בימים, אברהם בא בימים — he cites from the Arizal that every day is a living entity. Each day is a component of the soul itself.

Our task in this world is to take each of those days and polish it — to acquire Torah, to acquire mitzvos, to refine our conduct, to acquire awareness of Hashem. The earlier generations were handed three hundred thousand stones; the life of Adam HaRishon was three hundred thousand stones. They did not use their time. Instead of polishing all those parts of their neshamah, they soiled them. So Hashem gave their children fewer

stones. If a man is given too much work and does not do it, you give him less work. Our souls simply contain fewer stones, fewer days.

And then the Or HaChaim delivers the line that should unsettle every one of us. In our seventy years there are only about twenty-five thousand stones — ורבים מבני עמנו לא יעמדו בעבודה קלה כזו. There are many among our people who cannot manage even that light labor; **they cannot even polish twenty-five thousand stones**.

So we should look at our neshamah as a thing made of parts, and each part is a day. Every single day of our life is a stone that it is our job to shine, to polish, to turn into a treasure. We may not have three hundred thousand of them, but we have tens of thousands, and we must make certain we are worthy of every stone Hashem has entrusted to us. And in that merit, may Hashem bless us all.

Sources

1. הרמב"ם במורה נבוכים, חלק ב' פרק מ"ז — אורך ימי האנשים בזמנים ההם. Moreh Nevuchim 2:47 (not in Sefaria).