In the 601st year of Noah’s life, the Torah recounts the saga of one of the most heinous acts carried out upon a biblical personality. The Torah remains ambiguous about the specifics of Ham’s act towards his father, but from Noah’s ensuing curse (9:24), it is clear that his son committed a monstrous transgression. From the opening verse of the section (9:18), it is clear that Ham will be branded for all time because of the crime he commits as the Torah already labeled him Avi Kenaan (father of Kenaan): the biblical equivalent of calling someone a swear word; and this, before the account is even disclosed . Immediately following this verse, but before the tale begins, the Torah further introduces the section by informing the reader that the whole world was repopulated by Noah’s three sons (9:19). Clearly this seemingly random introductory verse is somehow central to the tale of Noah, for, besides the verse’s placement, the reader would have assumed as much considering that the Torah just finished musing over the world’s destruction.

Following the two opening verses, the narrative starts with three points that help to illuminate Noah’s post-deluge world: (1) ‘vayahel Noah,’ (2) identifying Noah as an ‘Ish ha-adama’ (man of the land), and (3) announcing that he planted a vineyard. While Rashi explains that (1) refers to the fact that Noah made himself mundane (hol; this is a play on the word hol), and shows how the whole narrative points to this fact, it appears that a more apt translation would be that Noah ‘started’ his new, post-deluge life by planting a vineyard (Onkelus). Or, another possibility is that ‘vayahel’ may mean ‘waited.’ The same Hebrew word appears but one chapter earlier (8:10; Noah waited – vayahel – another seven days and resent the dove) and undoubtedly means ‘waited’ there. Accordingly, our current verse would point to the fact that Noah was waiting for something as he planted the vineyard. While both these translations – ‘waited’ and ‘started’ respectively – are preferable over Rashi’s interpretation from an exegetical level, the reader is left wondering, according to both interpretations, what is the Torah trying to add by starting the account with this verb. Had this verb been omitted entirely, the narrative would have been virtually identical.

Regarding point (2), one may be surprised to find the Torah identify Noah as a ‘man of the ground.’ At the top of Sedra Noah (6:9), Noah was identified as a ‘righteous man, perfect in his generation.’ While the latter clause – perfect in his generation – might not mean much when the whole generation consists of but three other men (and therefore could be omitted without any mention), the fact that the Torah refrains from continuing to call Noah a ‘righteous man’ (zadiq) – and instead in (2) calls him a ‘man of the earth’ should call our attention. Why is he now identified by this mysterious label? Does this denote an active change on Noah’s part, or is this what God now expects of him?

Regarding the last point, – (3), that Noah planted a vineyard – one has to wonder why the Torah saw fit to record this point. If the end game was simply to arrive at how Noah became intoxicated, we could be sure that even the least creative mind could have drawn his own conclusions regarding how one gets drunk. Rather, the Torah must be telling us a key element in the post-deluge saga. For some reason, in Noah’s opinion, planting a vineyard was the next step in mankind’s epoch journey. But, obviously, something went awry.

The story continues with Noah imbibing wine from his vineyard, becoming intoxicated and, consequently, exposing himself in his tent. The exact nature of the intoxication is unclear: Is it that Noah happened to drink (for whatever reason) and happened to become intoxicated (perhaps accidentally) or did Noah imbibe with the intent of achieving a state of drunkenness? This question could hardly be answered by most people in pubs regarding themselves, so it is difficult for the biblical reader to be sure either way, but we could be sure that it was well within Noah’s ability to stop drinking before the point of intoxication. Also, we must realize this was not any run of the mill type of intoxication. This was Lot-level-intoxication, where the drinker is unaware of what has transpired until morning. While we could speculate that Noah’s drinking might have been easily rationalized: if anyone should have turned to the bottle with justification, it is Noah – a man who saw his parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and the rest of humanity executed by, proportionally, the greatest genocide mankind ever experienced. He would have good reason to drown his sorrows regarding the drowning of mankind at the bottom of a glass. But, it seems that there is more to the story that simple depression. Noah’s drinking seems to be purposeful, and the Torah wants us to know this by calling him a (1) man of the ground, (2) one who planted a vineyard and (3) one who drank from the wine. So, we could extrapolate from these facts Rashi’s point – that he intended to make himself un-sacred before the Lord – or we could hunt for a dignified explanation for Noah’s peculiar string of actions. To further buttress this point, we should note that the Torah could have easily skipped these three steps and started the tale from the fact that Noah once became intoxicated, and continued with Ham’s actions had it wanted to relay the point that Noah acted wrongly or the reason for Ham’s curse.

Casting aside the points revolving around alcohol for now, the nature of Noah’s nudeness is itself enigmatic. The Torah fails to record a reason for him exposing himself in his tent. (There’s no reason to assume it was especially hot, nor was a woman mentioned.) While nudeness is the natural consequent of certain drinker’s lifestyle, it does not seem to be the case here. The Torah makes a point of informing the reader that Noah exposed himself in his own tent: not in public; not necessarily where he got drunk, but in the privacy of his own tent. Clearly, not the most inimical state of undress ever recorded. Even the word the Torah chose to describe Noah’s nudity is unparalleled, and lacks sinisterness. It is not that he undressed, but that he ‘uncovered’ (vayagal) himself. Generally, the term ‘uncovered’ would conventionally be employed by when describing the action of uncovering wells or internments. The diction implies not so much that Noah was wearing clothes, but that he was covered by a foreign object and it was removed. So, before we attempt to explain Ham’s sin and its negative repercussions, we must first unearth Noah’s true intentions.

To do so, we have to first grasp the world of Noah; or, to be more specific: what was the world like that he entered post-flood? Let us remember that the rules of nature (8:22), morality (9:3) and physics (9:13) were all changed in the post-deluge world. There was no way for Noah to know what kind of life to expect to pursue in the 349 years he lived after the flood. He was sure that the world and all humanity would never again be destroyed by God, but that promise carries no prescription. The only laws that we would have expected him to uphold – the Noahide laws – were , for the most part, already compulsory before the flood. On the other hand, Adam was instructed to mind Gon Aden (2:15), Avraham was prescribed to “leave his land, his birthplace and his father’s house” (12:1) as well as nine other tests, and Moshe was charged with the holy mission of leading the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 3:10). But by Noah – nothing. He is never told anything save don’t eat blood: hardly a prescription for a holy life.

No doubt this conundrum plagued Noah. He knew it was his mission to live a holy life; he knew he was spared for a reason, but it was unclear how he was meant to implement his new post-flood life. One change that we can stand witness to is his decision to change the kind of person he was. The world no longer needed a ‘righteous man, perfect in his generation,’ in his opinion, nor an ‘ish yosheiv ohalim’ (man who sits in tents and studies), or a ‘ramai’ (trickster). It was time for an ‘Ish adama’ (a man of the ground). There is no reason to believe he acted as such upon the behest of God. Upon his own initiative, he chose to put into practice a plan for himself and the renewed world. And this plan started with a vineyard.

Based on the facts of the story, I believe we can reconstruct the Noah’s strategy. He considered that the time was ripe not only to renew the world starting anew with one family (which was God’s explicit plan), but to remake the actual metaphysical underpinnings of the world. Of course, practically every mystic and spiritually inclined person have sought after a similar goal, but clearly Noah stood at a unique juncture in human history to accomplish such a feat: God was already redoing countless other measures of the universe – why not this as well. Noah became an ‘Ish ha-adama’ because he wanted to be as much like Adam ha-Rishon as possible. He wanted, or assumed he was, the new Adam Ha-Rishon. Not a specifically crazy assumption considering his life’s experiences. (Lot’s daughters saw the destruction of but one district and thought as much.) It was up to his sons, who equally received the blessing from God to be fruitful and multiply (9:1), to renew the sheer numbers of the world – which they accomplished quite admirably – but Noah deemed it necessary for someone to take up the task of Ish Elokim. To be the man that Adam was destined to, and, what better time than at the start of the world, part two. But, where Adam and Hava alone enjoyed Gon Aden, its hashgacha (Divine influence) and its accompanying benefits, Noah understood that in the post-deluge world, the world was to be bifurcated into the religious and the secular; those who have the ability to partake of the world in its utopian form, in its messianic state, and those who are meant to repopulate the world. Perhaps this explains why he never went out proselytizing as Avraham had. He understood that the religious life was but for a few select individuals, while the rest of society is meant to simply populate the world.

After the flood, while God noted many differences in the world, none of these changes would have been obvious to the naked eye (save possibly the rainbow). Without doubt, this would have perplexed Noah: the world looked the same, but he knew in his heart that it was a completely different world. But, the most noticeable parallel between the pre-deluge era and the post was that Noah felt himself to be precisely the same, unchanged. There were no ostensible changes in him. Accordingly, he took matters into his own hands. No longer was he a ‘righteous man, perfect in his generation,’ but he was an ‘Ish Adama:’ a man devoted to the earth and its perfection. That was the first step. The next step was to situate himself in God’s land, under God’s auspices. He did this by planting a vineyard. While an Ish ha-adama clearly worked the land, planted, sewed, harvested, etc., by definition, the fact that he planted a vineyard was specifically important, for now he had something specific to tend to, just like Adam. He could work the whole earth, but the vineyard was the place that he would occupy and tend to personally.

But, no matter how hard he endeavored, a great chasm existed between himself and Adam. Adam ate from the Tree of knowledge, and the consequences were clear: he immediately clothed himself and saw the world in a completely different light. So what did Noah do? He drank of his wine in order to reverse the benefits of the Tree of knowledge. One who is intoxicated loses all his ability to accurately and effectively implement his faculties of knowledge (Daat) and reverts back to man’s nascent state and nature. It was Noah’s goal to live the utopian life of one who lived in the pre-sin era. This is why he drank, became intoxicated and undressed in his own tent. He was implementing a ritual in which he re-enacted the life of Adam. This is why the Torah states that Noah uncovered himself, as Noah viewed the clothing as a visual reminder that mankind was not living an ideal lifestyle, a pre-sin life. It is possible that he would do this on a weekly basis or annually, etc. But, the express goal was to identify himself with a different non-mundane life. Lack of daat and nudity were the two elements that he could re-create in his bid before God that he was the man to live the ideal life, the life that Adam and mankind were destined to live, yet rejected. They were the key to utopian man.

With this in mind, we can understand the term ‘vayahel,’ regardless of whether it means ‘And he started,’ or ‘And he waited.’ According to the former interpretation, it means that Noah started the world anew by planting a vineyard, as planting a vineyard was key to the world’s success. It was the means of tending a garden, becoming intoxicated and undressing positively. But if ‘vayahel’ means that Noah waited, we must interpret the narrative differently. It would mean that Noah waited for the vineyard and beyond to achieve this exalted status, – the status of Adam pre-sin – as the vineyard is the key to his strategy. Noah could not achieve this state without tending the land, and becoming intoxicated.

The fact that the world was repopulated by Noah’s sons and them alone is also now important. This point is not just introducing the obvious, but is also excluding Noah from the list of progenitors. As Noah had a completely different agenda, he never intended to have more children. Let us not forget that Adam only had relations with Hava post-sin and post expulsion (as the Torah, not Midrashim, makes abundantly clear). The pre-sin Adam did not even know he was naked. Sexuality was not a concept that Adam or Hava could relate to. Accordingly, by introducing that only Noah’s three sons fathered children is a keen insight into the way that Noah chose to live his life, and is therefore an apt introduction to the section of Ham’s sin.