

TIMELESS TORAH

NOACH - From Missed Opportunities to Opportunities Reclaimed

Swimming Against the Tide

Noach is one of the few people whom the Torah itself describes as being a tzaddik. Uniquely, however, the Torah qualifies this magnificent epithet by saying that Noach was a '*tzaddik b'dorata*' – a tzaddik in his generation; had he lived in a different generation, things might have been different. Seemingly, the Torah's testimony is resounding: Noach was a great man, and *b'dorata* teaches that had he lived in a generation such as Avraham Avinu's, which was known for its renaissance of teshuvah and faith in Hashem, he would have been even greater. Thus, Noach's actual spiritual level was gained despite his deleterious surroundings. While this is indeed one approach offered by the Sages, there is, surprisingly, a conflicting approach. Other Sages interpret this word negatively: Noach was only considered great compared to his own generation, but had he lived in Avraham's generation, he would not have been considered meritorious at all. After the Torah's seeming accolades, where did the Sages find an allusion that Noach was not quite as great as he seems to have been?

Rabbi Elazar Menachem Shach (Bnei Berak, d. 2001), the renowned Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivat Ponovezh, offers a fascinating perspective on this dispute. The key question, he contends, is not how great Noach was but whether his hypothetical level in different circumstances would have been enough to save him. Certainly, had Noach lived in a better environment, he would have been greater and holier, and according to one interpretation that would have been positive; in that case, he would certainly have been saved. But others see such a hypothetical circumstance as negative: if he would have reached his stature only because

of his righteous neighbours, his merit would not have been great enough to save him. Noach's redeeming feature was that he had the strength to swim against the tide.

Fundamentally, what concerned the Sages in their explanation of this verse was Noach's ability to independently recognize the correct path and deal as best as he could with the environment in which he was placed. Ultimately, when we analyse Noach's achievements, it must be within this frame of reference.

The Power of Conviction

The Ramban raises what is perhaps the most obvious question on this week's parshah. We know that Noach brought into the Teivah (Ark) two of every kind of animal and seven of every one of the kosher species, together with a year's worth of provisions for all the creatures on board. Clearly, for any vessel to be able to contain all of this was an open miracle, not bound by any known law of physics. Why, then, asks the Ramban, did Noach have to make the effort to build the Teivah to such large dimensions? If he anyway had to rely on a miracle to host the animals of the world, he could have just built a small rowing boat.

The Ramban explains that the reason that Hashem required Noach to embark on this project of building such an immense edifice must have been to publicise the matter and create an opportunity for Noach to persuade his peers to repent. Indeed, the Seforno (d.1549), citing the early Babylonian historian, Berossus Cladeus (third century BCE), testifies that Noach spent many years preaching to his neighbours to change their ways. But to no avail; we find that, in the end,



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the only people who were saved from the Flood were Noach and his immediate family. How is it that over 120 years, Noach failed to bring even one person to mend their ways?

Looking at a nuance in the verses, Rashi (7:7) reveals an intriguing insight into Noach's behaviour. Even after the rain of the Flood began to fall, Noach did not fully believe that the world was about to be wiped out, leaving him and his family the only survivors. It was only when the water levels rose uncomfortably that Noach actually entered the Teivah and shut the door. As the Steipler Gaon (Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky – Bnei Berak, d.1985) explains, despite the explicit prophecy he had received and despite the years upon years he had spent on this project, Noach had not fully internalised the truth that there would actually be a Flood. His belief in this matter remained intellectual and he had not managed to allow it to penetrate his very being. Possibly, suggests Rav Meir Shapira (Lublin, d. 1933), this was the allusion of the sign of the rainbow that Hashem showed to Noach immediately after the Flood ended. A rainbow typically emerges when the sun begins to shine after a dark and cloudy day, thus representing a complete change for the better. This was an allusion to Noach's shortcoming. He did not fully believe that things could change - not that the world could be entirely reset, and not that the wicked people of his generation could reset themselves. Without this absolute conviction, Noach remained unable to affect anyone other than himself.

A Hidden Journey

The commentators discuss a problem with the chronology of Avraham Avinu's journey to Eretz Canaan. Parshat Lech Lecha begins with Hashem's instruction to Avraham

to leave his homeland, Ur Kasdim, whereas Parshat Noach, the previous parshah, ends by recounting how Avraham, together with his entire family, had already left Ur Kasdim and settled in Charan. The commentators grapple with this, and the opinion of the Ibn Ezra (d.1167) is that the instruction of Parshat Lech Lecha is historic: Avraham was in Charan, and Hashem *had already* told him to leave his homeland. But this explanation is problematic because if so, Avraham had left Charan at the command of Hashem, and Terach had merely accompanied him. The verses at the end of Parshat Noach (11:29), however, are explicit that Terach was the one who initiated the move, not Avraham.

It must be, says Rav Soloveitchik (d.1993), that as well as Avraham's own need to travel at the behest of Hashem, Terach also had stirrings of repentance within him. Even though he was a professed idol-worshipper, and actively encouraged others in this practice, Terach decided, of his own accord, to move from the metropolis of Ur Kasdim to the relative backwaters of Charan. When Avraham came to him to announce his journey, he found that Terach had already packed his bags. That is why the Torah records Terach as having initiated the move. In the wider context of this parshah, then, if Noach teaches a lesson of missed opportunities, the story of Terach, by contrast, tells us that change is always possible and such opportunities can always be reclaimed.

**Next Week - Lech Lecha: The Power of
Covenantal Commitment**