

TIMELESS TORAH

NOACH: THE FOUNDATIONS OF HUMANITY: WHAT HOLDS THE WORLD TOGETHER?

The Fabric Beneath the Law

In 1971, psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted the now famous Stanford Prison Experiment, placing a group of university students in a mock prison and assigning some the role of guards and others of inmates. Although the participants had been screened for physical and psychological stability, the guards quickly drifted into arbitrary punishments and petty cruelty. Zimbardo himself, who was supervising the experiment, only fully recognised how far things had gone when a colleague described it as appalling. The experiment has since been critiqued for its methodology, but its central question remains: why do ordinary people abandon their decency when the structures around them permit it?

This question lies at the heart of Parshat Noach. Within a few generations, humanity has reached '*ketz kol basar*', the end of all flesh (6:13). The Sages offer a surprising insight into the nature of this degeneration in a Mishnah about commercial law. Halachah permits a buyer who has paid for goods but not yet taken possession of them to withdraw from the sale. Yet the Sages add a warning: the One who punished the generation of the Flood will punish anyone who fails to stand by their word (Bava Metzia 4:2). What is legally permissible is not necessarily ethically acceptable. Exploiting a loophole in the law can still mean betraying the principles on which it rests.

The Chizkuni (Rabbi Chizkiyah ben Manoach, 13th century) develops this idea in explaining the failure of the generation of the Flood. Although they had not yet been commanded to observe the Seven Noahide Laws, Hashem held them accountable for disregarding basic moral principles. The Jerusalem Talmud, for example,

describes how people of that generation would steal amounts too small to be reclaimed through the courts. Their behaviour might escape legal sanction, but they had abandoned the moral foundations that give the law its meaning. The problem was not simply that individuals found ways around the rules; it was that a whole society had come to treat the limits of enforcement as the limits of responsibility.

The Strength of Trust

Noach's character presents a striking contrast. The Torah describes him as an *ish tzaddik, tamim*, a righteous and blameless man (6:9). The expressions seem repetitive, but the Ibn Ezra (d. 1167) explains that *tzaddik* refers to someone whose actions are righteous, while *tamim* de-

scribes someone whose inner character is equally complete. The Netziv (Rabbi

Naftali Yehudah Tzvi Berlin, d. 1893) offers a slightly different interpretation: a *tzaddik* is faithful towards Heaven, while a *tamim* is also good towards other people. Both readings suggest that Noach's righteousness was reflected in everything he did.

“What is legally permissible is not necessarily ethically acceptable.”

Perhaps this is why '*Noach matza chein*', Noach found favour in the eyes of Hashem (6:8). The Midrash illustrates the idea through three images of a traveller who meets a stranger on the road and develops a friendship with him. In Rabbi Yochanan's version, the two simply enjoy each other's company. Reish Lakish goes further: the traveller entrusts the stranger with his property. In a third opinion,



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the traveller accepts the stranger as a fitting marriage partner for his daughter.

Understood properly, this Midrash is describing concentric circles of trust. Closeness at every level, from casual friendship to marriage, rests on reliability, or the confidence that someone will be tomorrow what he or she was yesterday. Noach is defined by that quality, and the other people of his generation by its absence. The generation of the Flood may have adhered to technical laws, but they paid no attention to the ethical fabric that keeps a legal system meaningful. Noach, however, 'found favour' with Hashem because his righteous actions were consistent with his moral compass.

The Danger of Unity

At first glance, the Generation of the Dispersion, who built the Tower of Babel, appears to represent the opposite problem. 'Vayehi kol ha'aretz safah echat', the whole earth had one language and one speech (11:1). Here was a united humanity, committed to a shared enterprise and capable of extraordinary cooperation. What, then, went wrong?

Many commentators explain that the builders' intention was heretical. The Ran (Rabbi Nissim of Gerona, d. 1376), however, rejects these explanations as implausible. He argues that building the Tower was not inherently wrong. The danger lay in the power of their unity: a society devoted to idolatry could become increasingly destructive as its collective strength grew. Cooperation, in other words, is not enough to make a society good; we must also ask what its shared purpose serves.

The dispersal of humanity, on this reading,

was also an act of rescue. The Ran draws on the experience of Jewish communities in medieval Iberia, where repeated exiles and the instability of the surrounding Arab and Christian kingdoms could, ironically, create opportunities for Jewish communities to flourish. A homogeneous civilisation, united around false values, leaves little room for dissent or fresh thinking. Dispersion, by contrast, creates the possibility of different perspectives and opens up new paths in the search for truth.

Difference does not guarantee wisdom, just as agreement does not guarantee wrongdoing. The Ran's point is that society needs room to question its assumptions; without it, a united community can

become trapped by its own errors.

For the Ran, this was the crucial consequence of Babel: the Dispersal

prepared the way for Avraham Avinu. Once the uniformity of the Tower was broken, there was room for the moral and intellectual journey embodied in Hashem's call to Avraham, *lech lecha*.

“Closeness at every level rests on reliability

The two stories of Parshat Noach provide a powerful perspective on the key pillars of humanity. On the one hand, humanity cannot survive without a sense of morality and ethics able to fill the gaps that legal systems leave. But on the other hand, a strong society also depends on the values it upholds and its willingness to search for truth. What matters is not simply whether a society holds together, but what its members ultimately stand for.

**LECH LECHA : Faith, Identity and the
Courage to Change**