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Making a World of a Difference

Two legendary figures: Noach and Avraham. For generations, great minds have compared and contrasted their lives. Some have argued for Noach's remarkable righteousness, as he rose above the mire of depravity and sinfulness that surrounded him. Others have minimized his spiritual accomplishments, which pale in comparison to Avraham's. Rashi draws our attention to the fact that Noach is said to have walked "with God" (Genesis 6:9), while Avraham walked "before God" (Genesis 24:40 and see 17:1). He explains that Noach needed help to be righteous, while Avraham drew strength from within to follow his path of righteousness unassisted.¹

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook perceived a more profound difference reflected by the Torah's choice of words.² Penetratingly, he said that walking "with God" is fulfilling

God's spiritual demands of the generation—no small feat—but no more. Noach did not take the initiative and elevate those around him; he boxed himself in, psychologically and physically on the ark, satisfied at having strenuously maintained the status quo. The opening verse emphasizes that Noach was "righteous in his generation" (Genesis 6:9), suggesting that he was resigned to the fact that little could be done to pull his contemporaries out of their quicksand of immorality.



Rav Abraham Isaac Kook zt"l

Avraham, on the other hand, although absolutely loyal to God's word, struck out on his own. He risked acting independently and creatively to better the world around him, as when he appointed himself the defense for an urban confederacy of sinners.

The Sages say that Avraham observed the entire Torah even before it was revealed at Sinai.³

Rav Kook took this to mean that Avraham was determined to speed up the process of divine revelation, to hasten the existential perfection and rectification of the world that in the divine plan was meant to occur only later. He laid the groundwork for this by sharing divine wisdom with and raising up the spirit of his generation. Walking "before God" is to act independently while bearing God's teachings and goals in mind, and, in a

1. Rashi on Genesis 6:9, s.v. את האלוהים התהלך נח.

2. The remarks below are based on *Midbar Shur, derush* 13.

3. Mishnah, *Kidushin*, 4:14.

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***"When it comes to the job market, Shlomo is the מַלְךְ."*—Rabbi Aryeh Ronay**

way, it is even to precede God.

Avraham's expansive idealism enabled him to recognize the raw spiritual potential latent in himself and in his generation. He firmly believed that every individual could strengthen and stretch their spiritual muscles to meet Olympic benchmarks. Not only was he convinced that humanity could better itself, but he believed that humanity could be catapulted to awesome heights. Avraham entertained visions of grandeur about the world.

Not long ago, Rav Kook, himself an Avraham, followed in our forefather's footsteps and walked "before God." He discerned the amazing vitality and profound potential of the soul of the Jewish nation. After our tortuous and torturous exile, his lofty teachings, which radiate love for others, have been a

boon to the rejuvenation of our national spirit. Two great Avrahams, the first Jew in history and the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, had the firm conviction that every individual has the power to effect revolutionary change.

We are all called to walk Avraham's path. Judaism is a faith for those who seek to change the world. To be a Jew is to seek to make a difference, to change lives for the better, to heal the scars of our fractured world. We are not meant to ride the tide, alone, but to be a tide that raises all boats. ■



Rabbi Goldscheider's most recent OU Press Publication, "Torah United" on the weekly Parsha, can be ordered directly from Rabbi Goldscheider at aarong@ouisrael.org at a special price for Torah Tidbits readers.