



MRS. MICHAL HOROWITZ

Torah Educator
Presenter for OU Women's Initiative

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The Measure of Righteousness

Parshas Noach begins ten generations after Creation, when we learn of a corrupt world. The Torah tells us about one man and his family - Noach, Naama, Shem, Cham, Yafes and their wives - who remained untainted. Hashem tells Noach that He will bring a great deluge to destroy the world and humanity, and after the flood, we meet a broken and shattered Noach, trying to rebuild after destruction.

The *parsha* begins by introducing us to its hero:

אַלֶּה תוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֶאֱמַר צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו
אֵת־הָאֱלֹקִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ־נֹחַ
- These are the offspring of Noah: Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generation; Noah walked with G-d (Bereishis 6:9).

At face value, the pasuk seems to be praising Noach highly, and yet, the Sages understand something deeper.

בְּדֹרֹתָיו - "in his generation." Why does the Torah qualify Noach's righteousness by tying it to his generation? Was he absolutely righteous - or only by comparison?

Rashi records a famous dispute among Chazal. Some understand this word as praise: if Noach remained a *tzaddik* in a generation as corrupt as his own, then in a generation of righteous people he would have been even more righteous. Others read the very same word as a limitation: it was only relative to his wicked generation that Noach was considered righteous. Had he lived in the generation of Avraham Avinu, he would have been considered as "k'lum, nothing".

The same one word: בְּדֹרֹתָיו - "in his generation," with two opposing opinions. What is the Torah teaching us?

Perhaps the Torah is telling us something profound about righteousness: how we measure the people around us and how we measure ourselves.

If righteousness is only relative - "I'm doing fine compared to everyone else" - then we risk our behavior and actions collapsing into complacency. We look around at a compromised world and may conclude that our own compromises are perfectly acceptable, perhaps even better than acceptable! "Compared to everyone else around me, I'm doing great," we may lead ourselves to believe. The yetzer hara needs no better

Jonathan Rosenblum, DPM

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argument than this.

However, there is a danger in the absolute standard as well. If we measure ourselves only against the greatest *tzaddikim*, against an ideal of perfection untouched by personal life circumstances, we then risk despair. We forget that Hashem judges each person within the reality of *his own life* - his challenges, his background, his generation, his own unique strengths and weaknesses. As Chazal teach: *לפום צערא אגרא* - *according to the effort is the reward* (Pirkei Avos 5:23). The effort matters. The context matters. The individual matters.

The Torah, in its wisdom, holds both truths at once. Noach is called *איש צדיק תמים* - genuinely righteous and pure. And yet the Torah will not let us forget *בְּדֹרֶתוֹ* - that his righteousness was born in the very times in which he lived, against the current of those around him in his generation.

There is another nuance in the *pasuk* worth studying. The Torah does not say that Noach walked before G-d, but rather that he walked *with* G-d: *אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הֵתְקַלְךָ־נֹחַ*.

Rashi explains: Avraham, of whom it is said "*walk before Me*" (Bereishis 17:1), drew strength from within his spiritual reserves and walked on his own. Noach walked *with* G-d - he needed Hashem's support to hold him up.

From here we learn that even the *tzaddik* of his generation did not stand alone. He leaned on the very Hand of G-d that measured him. Perhaps that is why the Torah calls him *תמים*, *pure* - because he was pure and wholehearted and knew to Whom to turn when he was in need.

These lessons, from the personality of Noach, have powerful implications for

how we see others. In the realm of *chinuch*, when we evaluate a child or a student, do we measure him against his siblings, classmates, or some abstract ideal? Or do we ask a deeper question: given *his* generation, *his* struggles, *his* starting point - is he walking, *as best he can*, with G-d? A child who works hard for every accomplishment may find greater success - for him, in his exact situation - than the one for whom everything comes easily.

The same is true in our interpersonal relationships. In *shalom bayis*, in friendship, in community - we are, all too often, quick to judge others against an absolute standard while judging ourselves generously against our circumstances.

The Torah subtly asks us to reverse that: to extend to others the understanding of context we grant ourselves, while holding ourselves to the higher standard we demand of others.

And in our own *avodas Hashem*, the message of Noach is both a *chizuk* and a demand. *Chizuk*, because Hashem certainly sees the generation we live in - its distractions, pressures, confusion, and challenges - and He measures our strivings accordingly. Yet, demanding, because "everyone else is struggling too" can never be an excuse for standing still or our own complacency with self.

Noach built his *teivah* while everyone around him mocked him. He walked *with* G-d while the generation walked *away* from G-d. He did not wait for better company or easier times. He was righteous - *in his generation*, and therefore, *for all generations*.

May we merit to walk with Hashem and reach our individual potential, for the

generation and times in which we live.

May we be honest about where we stand, generous in how we see others, and unwilling to let the darkness around us hold us back from reaching our own potential as individuals, as Jews, and as *ovdei Hashem*.

■ בברכת בשורות טובות ושבת שלום.

Michal Horowitz is a Torah educator who lectures nationally throughout the United States, as well as internationally. Thousands of her shiur recordings are available online. She is a regular presenter for the OU Women's Initiative and the author of *Abled: Living With a Disability*, a Torah View (Mosaica Press). Michal lives in Woodmere, NY, with her family.

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