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Saving the World or Saving His Home?

There are few personalities in the Torah as difficult to define as Noach. The Torah calls him:

נח איש צדיק תמים הָיָה בְּדֹרֵתּוֹ

Noach was a righteous man; he was wholehearted in his generation.¹

And yet, Chazal famously compare Noah with Avraham and seem to suggest that Noach did not reach the level of greatness that Avraham achieved. Was Noach a great tzaddik who simply lived in a terrible generation? Was there something missing from his greatness?

NOAH'S MISSION WAS DIFFERENT

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky² offers an insightful approach to this question. Instead of asking, “Why wasn't Noach more like Avraham?” Rabbi Yaakov asks us to

appreciate the possibility that Noach had an entirely different mission.

The Midrash makes a remarkable statement:

אָמַר רַבִּי סִימּוֹן: מִצִּינּוֹ שֶׁהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עוֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד עִם הָאַחֲרֹנִים בְּזִכּוֹת הָרִאשׁוֹנִים. וּמִנֵּיין שֶׁהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עוֹשֶׂה עִם הָרִאשׁוֹנִים בְּזִכּוֹת הָאַחֲרֹנִים? וְנַח מֵצֵא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי ה', בְּאִיזוֹ זְכוּת? בְּזִכּוֹת תּוֹלְדוֹתָיו.

Rabbi Simon said: We find that Hashem acts kindly toward later generations in the merit of earlier generations. And from where do we know that Hashem acts kindly toward earlier generations in the merit of later generations? ‘Noach found favor in the eyes of Hashem’, in whose merit? In the merit of his descendants.³

At first glance, this is difficult. How could Noach be saved because of his children? His children were not yet the great figures they would eventually become. The Torah itself makes clear that Hashem's instructions regarding the Ark were given to Noach. What does the Midrash mean?

NOAH'S GREAT ACHIEVEMENT:

HE PROTECTED HIS FAMILY

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky explains that the Midrash is revealing something profound about Noach's greatness. Chazal⁴

1. Bereshit 6:9

2. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, Emet L'Yaakov

3. Bereshit Raba 29:5

4. Bereshit Raba 30:9

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famously debate the meaning of: נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדורתי

Rabbi Yehudah says: בְּדֹרֵתוֹ הָיָה צָדִיק, אֱלֹהֵי הָיָה בְּדֹרוֹ שֶׁל שְׁמוּאֵל לֹא הָיָה צָדִיק.

Noach was righteous in his generation; had he lived in the generation of Moshe or Shmuel, he would not have been considered righteous.

Rabbi Nechemiah disagrees: וְכַמָּה אִם בְּדֹרֵתוֹ הָיָה צָדִיק, אֱלֹהֵי הָיָה בְּדֹרוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה אִם בְּדֹרוֹ שֶׁל שְׁמוּאֵל עַל אַחַת כְּמָה וְכַמָּה – *If he was righteous in his generation, how much more so would he have been righteous in the generation of Moshe or Shmuel.*

Rabbi Nechemiah then gives a remarkable metaphor: מִשָּׁל לְצִלּוּחִית שֶׁל אֶפְרַסְמוֹן, מוֹקֶפֶת צָמִיד פְּתִיל, וּמִנְחַת בֵּית הַקְּבָרוֹת, וְהָיָה רִיחָה נֹדֵד. וְאֵלֹהֵי הָיָה חוֹצָה לוֹ עַל אַחַת כְּמָה וְכַמָּה. It is like a sealed flask of perfume lying in a cemetery, yet its fragrance still spreads. If it had been outside the cemetery, how much more so would its fragrance have spread.

Rabbi Nechemiah is not criticizing Noach. He is defending him. The generation of the Mabul was not merely a generation with a few bad people. The entire environment had become corrupt. The Torah says: וַתִּשָּׁחַת הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹקִים וַתִּמָּלֵא. הָאָרֶץ חָמָס. The earth had become corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.⁵

Noach was living in what Rabbi Nechemiah compares to a cemetery. What did he do? He sealed himself. He protected his family. He built a spiritual environment in which his family could survive. That may not have been the mission of Avraham. But perhaps it was exactly the mission of

Noach.

THE TENT OF THE UPRIGHT WILL FLOURISH

The Midrash interprets another pasuk in Mishlei: בֵּית רָשָׁעִים יִשָּׁמַד, וְאֹהֶל יֹשְׁרִים יִכָּרֵחַ. The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish.⁶ The Midrash explains: בֵּית רָשָׁעִים יִשָּׁמַד זֶה דֹּר הַמַּבּוּל. וְאֹהֶל יֹשְׁרִים יִכָּרֵחַ זֶה נֹחַ. The house of the wicked will be destroyed, this refers to the generation of the Mabul. The tent of the upright will flourish: this refers to Noach. Why specifically a tent? Noach's greatness was that he protected his tent. He understood that the world outside had become spiritually toxic. His task was not necessarily to transform that world. His task was to make certain that the world did not transform his family.

That is a form of greatness that we sometimes underestimate. We tend to measure influence by how many people we reach. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky teaches that there are times when the greatest influence is exercised inside the home. Noach could not save the generation. But he saved his family. From that family came Shem. From Shem came the Beit Midrash of Shem and Ever. From that Beit Midrash came Yaakov Avinu.

WHY DID YAAKOV NEED FOURTEEN YEARS IN THE BEIT MIDRASH?

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky consistently uses this explanation to answer another famous question. Yaakov is sent to Haran. His parents tell him to go to the house of Lavan. Yet before he gets there, Yaakov spends fourteen years studying in the Beit Midrash of Shem and Ever. Why the detour? Yaakov had already learned Torah for

5. Bereshit 6:11

6. Mishle 14:11

decades from Yitzhak. Why did he suddenly need another fourteen years of Torah?

Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky answers that Yaakov needed a different kind of Torah. Until now, Yaakov had grown up surrounded by tzaddikim. His grandfather was Avraham. His father was Yitzhak. His mother was Rivkah. He had lived in an environment saturated with holiness. Suddenly everything was changing. Yaakov was going to Lavan. He was entering a world of deception, dishonesty, manipulation, and spiritual hostility. He needed to learn something he had never needed before: How do you remain a Jew when the environment around you is not Jewish? How do you remain honest when everyone else is dishonest? How do you remain faithful when the people around you do not share your values? How do you maintain your identity without allowing the environment to redefine you?

That was the Torah of Shem and Ever. Where did Shem learn it? From Noach. Shem had been raised in the generation of the Mabul. Ever had been raised in the generation of the Dor Haflagah. They had learned how to remain righteous in HOSTILE environments. Yaakov needed precisely that Torah.

THE TORAH THAT YAAKOV GAVE YOSEF

This also explains a remarkable comment of Rashi. When Yaakov later teaches Yosef, Rashi tells us that Yaakov transmitted to Yosef the Torah he had learned in the Beit Midrash of Shem and Ever.⁷ Why only to Yosef? Because Yosef was about to enter a world even more foreign than the world Yaakov had encountered. Yosef was going

to Egypt. He would be completely alone in a foreign land without a spiritual support system. He would be surrounded by a culture whose values were radically different from his own. He needed the Torah of Shem and Ever.

That is the greatness of Noach. Noach did not have a community reinforcing his values. He was surrounded by a spiritual cemetery. Nevertheless, he remained Noach and he made sure that his family remained part of that same world.

Avraham was the great outward-facing tzaddik. His greatness was measured by how many people he could bring closer to Hashem. Noach was the great inward-facing tzaddik. His greatness was measured by whether he could preserve holiness in an environment that was trying to destroy it. Both are necessary. There are times when we have to go out into the world and influence it. Yet, there are times when we have to recognize that the world is influencing us and we need to protect ourselves. The wisdom lies in knowing which moment we are living in.

WHAT KIND OF TEIVAH ARE WE BUILDING?

The Torah tells us that Noach built a teivah. We usually think of the teivah as the vehicle that saved Noah from the Mabul. Perhaps there is another way to understand it. The teivah was not merely a boat. It was a protected environment. Outside was chaos. Inside was Torah, family, responsibility, and the preservation of life. There are times when every Jewish home needs its own teivah. We cannot always control what happens outside our homes. We cannot determine what our children will see, what society will value, or what

7. Bereshit 37:3

messages will surround them. But we can determine what happens inside our tent. What do our children hear? What do they see us value? What happens on Shabbat? How do we speak about other people? How do we respond when someone needs help? What role does Torah play in our lives? Do our children see Judaism as something we merely practice, or as the framework through which we live? That is the challenge of Noah.

This explains why the Midrash claims that Noah was saved in the merit of his children. The Midrash is telling us that the way a person builds his home becomes part of his own *zechut* (merit). The children are not merely the recipients of a parent's values. They become the parent's legacy. A person may not be able to change the entire world, but he can change a home. A home can change a family and a family can change generations. Shem learned from Noah. Yaakov learned from Shem. Yosef learned from Yaakov. Through Yosef, the Jewish people survived Egypt.

Before we can influence the world, we must make sure that we have built a strong foundation in our homes. Noah teaches us that saving a family is not a small form of leadership. Sometimes the greatest thing a person can do for the future of Klal Yisrael is to build a home in which the future can survive. ■

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