



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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Judging Noah Fairly

Lately, I've been reflecting on the early origins of my basic beliefs. One of those beliefs, which has thankfully persisted to this day, has been the belief in fairness. I guess that I first learned about fairness on the playgrounds of the neighborhood in Brooklyn, where I grew up.

Our mentors on those playing fields, where we became adept at punchball, and later at softball and basketball, were not professional adult coaches. Rather, they were other boys, barely a year or two older than us. But fair play, and consideration for those of us with lesser athletic skills, were among the lessons they taught and the lessons that we internalized.

Of course, I later learned that those lessons were among the ancient teachings of the Jewish tradition. "Don't judge your fellow until you have been in his environment." "Appreciate the leaders of your own era, even if they don't quite compare with the leaders of old." "Judge each person favorably, according to his own merits."

But while I was imbibing those lessons on the playground, I was introduced to the study of *Chumash* and Rashi in the classroom. It was then that I was introduced to Noah, the central figure of this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Noach* (Genesis 6:9-11:32). Here was a man "who found favor

in the eyes of the Lord," and who was not only a *tzaddik*, a righteous man, but a *tzaddik tamim*, a perfectly righteous man.

I vividly remember asking my grandfather, who had one of the few *sukkot* in the neighborhood back then, if we could hang a picture of Noah on the wall of the *sukkah* along with the other biblical heroes whose portraits bedecked the walls of the *sukkah* of which he was so proud.

I was taken aback by his retort: "Have you not learned in school that Noah was not as great as Abraham, and that had he lived in Abraham's time, he would be a 'nobody'?" I had to confess that we had not yet learned Rashi's commentary, and certainly not the many other rabbinic sources, that insist that Noah fell short of the requirements necessary for us to emulate him, and therefore we could not invite him into our *sukkah* as we did with other

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this TT be ל"ע and in loving memory of
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biblical heroes from Abraham on.

Much later in life, in fact very recently, I came across what might be the harshest critique of Noah in all of rabbinic literature. It is a passage in the Holy Zohar, which contrasts Noah with Abraham. This supremely mystical work condemns Noah. The Lord informed Noah that He found mankind to be so degenerate that He had decided to wipe out all living beings and spare only Noah and his family. What was Noah reaction? Did he protest? No! He was silent. He said nothing.

But ten generations later, when the Lord informed Abraham that he was about to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wicked ways, Abraham protested to the Almighty. He challenged Him to live up to His divine principles of fairness and justice, and not punish the few exceptional individuals who were morally upstanding. Noah was silent and is therefore castigated. Abraham voiced his protest and is therefore admired.

The Zohar takes the matter even further and finds Abraham himself inferior to Moses. After all, Abraham only asked for the righteous to be spared, whereas Moses asked that the Lord even spare sinners. Moses was sufficiently stalwart to demand

that the Lord either forgive all of the Israelites, including the sinners, or else “wipe me out from the Book which You have written.” Moses was willing to give up everything rather than see anyone punished.

To this day, I ask myself the question, as numerous students of Torah have asked before me, “Are we judging Noah fairly?”

I try to empathize with Noah. I ask myself, perhaps he was a meek and humble person, who felt inadequate to stand up to others and rebuke them for their iniquities? Perhaps he was reluctant to debate those around him because he might be persuaded that their immorality was good and proper, and his morality naïve and foolish? Or perhaps he felt that his generation was so decadent that preaching to them would be a futile undertaking, that they were beyond hope of rehabilitation?

Very recently, I came across a book from which I derived an approach to understanding Noah and justifying his relative failures. It is a book by a contemporary rabbinic scholar, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, entitled *HaMakor HaKaful (The Double Source)*. Rabbi Bin-Nun offers an approach to understanding the psyche of the great Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, whose leadership as Chief Rabbi and vast and

brilliant oeuvre of writings continue to inspire us to this day.

Rabbi Bin-Nun maintains that all great leaders draw from two distinct sources. He calls them *samchut* and *hashraah*, which I suggest can be translated as “a sense of one’s own authority” and “spiritual inspiration.” The former originates within the person, from the depths of his or her own psyche. The latter comes from an external source, from the Almighty. As I understand it, the former often takes the form of a felt mission, a purpose in life, an inner drive to accomplish a specific set of goals. The latter is a calling from Above, a Holy Spirit, a prophetic calling.

Rabbi Bin-Nun suggests that Rav Kook drew from both sources. He felt an internal impetus to lead, to return to the Land of Israel from his native Latvia, to envision the pioneers of early immigration to Israel as the vanguard of the ultimate redemption. But he also heard a voice from a second source, an external sublime source, a prophetic inspiration.

I suggest that Rabbi Bin-Nun’s concept of *samchut* can be used to differentiate between the inactivity of Noah, the partial response of Abraham, and the total sense of responsibility for the other as exemplified by Moses.

What was Noah’s sense of mission? He really had only one mission—to construct the ark. Once he had done that, and successfully steered the ark through months of troubled waters, he had no coherent

sense of mission. All he could do was plant a vineyard, with inevitable consequences.

His feeble sense of mission limited him, and thus he could not stand up in protest of the Lord’s Decree. He could not become a leader of men.

Abraham, on the other hand, had a clear sense of mission. The Lord Himself declared, “For I know him, that he will direct his descendants to do righteousness and justice.” Justice was his mission, and so he could stand up to the Almighty and insist upon justice.

Moses had an entirely different understanding of his mission. He was to lead the Jewish people, saints and sinners alike, into the Land of Israel. That mission enabled him to fearlessly confront the Almighty and demand that He totally forgive His people.

The lesson for all of us is that we have a mission to perform in life. It is not a simple matter to determine what that mission is. But once we achieve even a tentative sense of mission and purpose, we gain a measure of confidence and authority which equip us with capacities and capabilities beyond our expectations.

Noah was not morally defective. He was indeed a *tzaddik tamim*. However, he lacked a sense of mission and purpose, and that constrained him tragically.

We are all descendants of Abraham and disciples of Moses and are thereby blessed with a variety of missions which we must recognize, and which must motivate us to undreamed of accomplishments. ■

