

Parshat Lech Lecha: Noah vs. Avraham: The Confidence to be Compassionate

Rabbi Atara Cohen

Class of 2020

Avraham is well known as a better and more effective hero than Noah. Rashi famously explains that Noah was only righteous in his own generation, while Avraham was righteous for all generations. Rav Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev (1740-1804), a third generation Hasidic thinker, has a striking analysis of the difference between Avraham and Noah's leadership in his *Kedushat Levi*. Rav Levi Yitzchok writes in his essays on Parashat Noah:

אלה תולדות נח (בראשית ו, ט). נראה דהנה יש שני מיני צדיקים שעובדים את הבורא, צדיק אחד יש שעובד הבורא ברוך הוא בהתלהבות גדול והוא לעצמו ואינו מקרב הרשעים להיותם גם כן מעובדי הבורא ברוך הוא רק שהוא בפני עצמו לבדו עובד הבורא, ויש צדיק אחד שעובד הבורא ומחזיר הרשעים להיות גם כן מעובדי הבורא כמו אברהם אבינו שהיה מגייר גרים.

"These are the descendents of Noah" (Genesis 6:9): We see that there are two types of righteous people (*tzaddikim*) who worship The Creator, one *tzaddik* exists who worships the Blessed Creator with great enthusiasm, and he is for himself, and does not bring the wicked ones close so that they too can be of the Blessed Creator's worshippers, only that he by himself worships the creator. And there is one *tzaddik* who worships the creator and returns the wicked people so that they too can be of the worshippers of The Creator, such as Avraham our Patriarch who converted converts.

Both Avraham and Noah were *tzaddikim*. Noah also worshipped God with incredible devotion. However, Avraham was the greater *tzaddik* because he engaged with other people and helped them become close to God alongside himself. Noah remained isolated and did not engage with his generation, allowing them to continue to sin horrifically. Rav Levi Yitzchak reads this distinction into the verses:

והטעם "את האלקים התהלך נח", רצה לומר רק "את האלקים" היה מתהלך נח, נח לבדו היה עובד הבורא ברוך הוא אבל לא היה מתהלך עם הבריות לקרבם להיות מעובדי הבורא ברוך הוא

And the reason [the verse says] "Noah walked with God" is that it wants to say that Noah **only** walked with God, Noah worshipped The Blessed Creator alone, but he did not walk with the creations to bring them to be among the worshippers of The Blessed Creator.

Walking with God is good, but walking only with God is not excellent. True religious excellence comes with engaging with others.

Rav Levi Yitzchak then draws a second distinction between Noah and Avraham, a second hierarchy of *tzaddikim*.

נבוא לבאר, כי יש שני מיני צדיקים שעובדים הבורא: יש צדיק שעובד הבורא ואין לו חשק רק להיות עובד הבורא ומאמין שיש לו כח בעליונים להנהיג העולמות כרצונו כמו שאמרו חכמינו ז"ל (מועד קטן טז:): "צדיק מושל ביראת אלהים" (שמואל ב' כג. ג) מי מושל בי? צדיק. הקדוש ברוך הוא גוזר, וצדיק מבטל הגזירה לטובה. "יש צדיק אחד שעובד הבורא ברוך הוא והוא שפל בעיני עצמו מאוד

We will come to explain that there are two types of *tzaddikim* who worship The Creator: there is the *tzaddik* who worships The Creator and he only has the desire to worship The Creator, and believes that he has power on high to rule the worlds as he wants, as our Sages of blessed memory said, "A *tzaddik* rules with fear of God" (Samuel II 23:3) - who rules over me? A *tzaddik*. The

ומאוד וחושב בלבו מי אני שאתפלל לבטל הגזירה לכן אינו מתפלל לבטל...
לבוטל...

Holy Blessed one decrees, and the *tzaddik* cancels the decree for good.” (BT MQ 16b)

And there is one *tzaddik* who worships The Creator, and he is very very low in his own eyes, and thinks “who am I that I will pray to cancel the decree?” and therefore he does not pray to cancel it...

... וזוה שפירש רש"י אף נח מקטני אמנה היה, רצה לומר נח היה קטן בעיניו באמונה שהוא צדיק תמים שיכול לבטל הגזירה שלא היה חשוב בעיני עצמו כלום.

... And this is as Rashi comments “even Noah was of small belief,” meaning that Noah was small in his own eyes in belief that he was a perfect *tzaddik* that could cancel the decree, that he wasn’t important in his own eyes at all.

Avraham, on the higher level, had the confidence and belief in himself to challenge God’s decrees, most notably when he protests God destroying Sdom. Noah, on the other hand, was complacent and therefore complicit in the destruction of the world because he did not challenge God.

Here we have two ideals of righteousness: one of a *tzaddik* who engages other people, and one of a *tzaddik* with the confidence to challenge God. Although Rav Levi Yitzchok does not directly connect these two models, I argue that they are intrinsically linked. Outreach and compassion for others will lead a person to protest decrees that harm those for whom they have compassion. If Noah had tried to engage the people around him, he would have come to care about them and then would protest the flood that would destroy them.

A wise bat mitzvah student challenged me about the Kedushat Levi’s point. Is this not arrogant? Who are we to tell God to change God’s plans?

I believe that perhaps this might be arrogant for someone who knows God’s reasoning (though this arrogance need not be bad.) However, unlike Avraham or Noah, most of us do not have insight into why God allows awful things to happen to us; we only know that people suffer. Because we can’t know God’s ways, we are not arrogant when we challenge the status quo of pain. Without indication otherwise, alleviating the suffering of others is always good. Therefore, we must have the self-confidence to challenge the decrees of violence and pain that permeate our world, or else we are complicit like Noah. We must seek out others and understand their pain so that we can challenge the systems that cause suffering.



Rabbi Atara Cohen is passionate about Torah which speaks to our social, intellectual, and emotional realities. She received semikha from Yeshivat Maharat in June and currently teaches Limmudei Qodesh at The Heschel Middle School. She has studied Torah in a variety of settings, including Midreshet Nishmat, Hadar, Drisha and a BA in religion at Princeton University. During rabbinical school, Atara focused on human rights and social change through various fellowships. She served as a rabbinic intern at the Columbia-Barnard Hillel and a Cooperberg-Rittmaster Pastoral and Educational Intern at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah. Atara lives in Manhattan, where she runs, knits, and experiments with Persian cooking.