

Parshat Noach: Walking Before God

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Welcome to a year-long journey of Torah study. I will be focusing my attention on aspects of the *parsha* that speak to existential or spiritual issues. At Yeshivat Maharat I co-teach a four-year course called Pastoral Torah, which weaves clinical pastoral education and Torah texts to both deepen our psychological awareness and humanize our Torah study. The *parsha* meditations that will follow each week are very much in that spirit. Join me!

This week's *parsha*, *parshat Noach*, begins with an account of the moral worthiness of its hero:

אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ־נֹחַ:

This is the lineage of Noach: Noach was a righteous man, blameless in his time. Noach walked with God. (Genesis 6:9)

Attributions of piety and perfection are very unusual in the Torah. Indeed, praise for the much-lauded biblical characters that will follow—our forefathers and our foremothers, for example—will fall short of such pronouncements. Only Noach receives a description of such flawlessness, and for this pristine character he was presumably rewarded with survival in the face of the world-destroying flood.

And yet, despite such a promising introduction, it is only three chapters later that our pious hero is found naked and drunk in his tent, having planted a vineyard and enjoyed its fruit as his first earthly act post-flood. Noach finally appears in this text as a morally compromised individual. The mighty hero falls and he falls fast. What happened to cause such a rapid downfall and what is the significance of the tragic end?

The *midrash* in *Breishit Rabbah*, as quoted by Rashi, resolves this problem by diminishing Noach's credentials from the outset. Noach was a righteous man "*b'dorotav*," in his corrupt era only. "Had he been in Avraham's generation, however, he would not have been considered anything at all." His lapse in judgement was thus not an aberration from his fine character, but rather a manifestation of his always frail one.

Midrash Tanchuma adds a rather stinging, subtle layer to this condemnation. In a *midrash* brought to my attention by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (in his commentary on the *parsha*), it states:

Once the waters had abated, Noach should have left the ark. However, Noach said to himself: "I entered with God's permission, as it says, 'Go into the ark' (Genesis 7:1). Shall I now leave without permission?" The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to him, "Is it permission, then, that you are seeking? Very well, then, here is permission," as it is said, [God said to Noach] "Come out of the ark" (Genesis 8:16).

Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai said: "If I had been there, I would have broken down the ark and taken myself out." (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Buber, Noach 13-14)

The rabbis of this *midrash* were picking up on a subtle feature of the flood narrative. The story unfolds with great rapidity: God orders Noach to build an ark with specific measurements and a particular crew, Noach's family and representatives of all animals. The rain begins, the earth is flooded, the rain then stops, and the waters recede. One would expect Noach to emerge from his cramped quarters at this point. But, alas, for 14 more verses, we are treated to a slow motion narrative in which precious little actually happens. The ark comes to a rest. Noach opens a window and sends out a raven. Then he sends out a dove. Then he waits seven days and sends out the dove again. It returns with an olive branch. Then seven more days elapse and he sends out the dove again. This time it

does not return...yet Noah *still* does not leave the ark. Finally, finally God tells him to, and he obliges. In the words of the *midrash*, God granted Noah the permission he was waiting for.

And herein lay his downfall. For the moral hero does not wait to be granted permission to take action. She seizes it. She steps out away from shelter toward shaky ground, because that is where the work needs to be done, where the rebuilding needs to take place. Says Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai: "If I had been there, I would have broken down the ark and taken *myself* out." Courage sometimes means breaking a few walls to save a broken world.

This was not Noah, though. Noah was the quintessential model of biblical obedience. Four times in two chapters we are told that "Noah did everything just as God had commanded him" (Genesis 6:22, 7:5, 7:9, 7:16). He followed every command meticulously, building the ark just so, with these dimensions and that window opening, welcoming aboard two of each kind of impure animal and seven sets of each kind of pure one. He does not utter even a single syllable when he hears about the destruction of humanity. He silently abides by God's every word, and surely for this devotion he was rewarded abundantly.

But the rapid descent of Noah announces the limits of this sort of blind obedience. The unquestioning hero cannot last as a hero, for God does not want automatons but rather willful agents, and God's world demands difficult action. Obedience is not the highest virtue in our tradition; responsibility is.

It is therefore Avraham, in next week's *parsha*, who truly becomes the first biblical hero--Avraham who argues with God, fights on behalf of people, and takes responsibility for them. Faced with a similar challenge to that of Noah--the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah--Avraham would not stay silent. He lobbied on behalf of even the most despised, trying desperately to save not only himself and his family, but the entire world.

חללה לך מעשת כדבר הזה להמית צדיק עם־רשע והיה כצדיק כרשע חללה לך השפט כל־הארץ לא יעשה משפט
Shame on you! Will the Judge of the whole world not act justly?!" he famously challenges God. (Genesis 18:25)

This is the stuff of moral grandeur.

Noah, who saved only himself, proves in his demise that to save only yourself is not even to save yourself. But Avraham understood that there is no saving of the self, and no virtue in saving oneself, without the saving of others.

Thus to Avraham God said, . . . הִתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי וְהָיָה תָמִים. . . Walk before me and become blameless. (Genesis 17:1)

Echoing the description of Noah who walked *with* God and was blameless (*tamim*), yet tweaking it importantly, Avraham is told to walk *before* God and to thereby *become* blameless. He is to lead the way, to be one step ahead of God, so to speak, not awaiting permission to care for the shattered world, but actively seeking to heal it. That assumption of responsibility and that spiritual audacity would give Avraham the tools to move--always aspirationally, never stagnantly--toward piety. As children of Avraham, this is the bold charge that becomes our inheritance and our challenge.

May we all seize responsibility for that which is broken around us. May we actively take the lead on making this world a better place, with strength, conviction, and, when appropriate, without asking for permission.



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