

CHAPTER 5, MISHNA 3: ABRAHAM'S LEGACY

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There were ten generations from Noah until Abraham. This shows how slow to anger G-d is, for all those generations increasingly angered Him until our forefather Abraham came and received the reward of them all.

This week's mishna parallels the previous. Both mishnas list ten generations which were fraught with wickedness and which culminated in a righteous man. Last week's mishna discussed the ten generations from Adam till Noah while this week's the ten from Noah till Abraham.

The commentators note an important discrepancy between the languages of the two mishnas. Last week's mishna mentioned ten generations who increasingly angered G-d until He brought upon them the Flood, whereas this week's mentioned ten generations who angered G-d until Abraham "received the reward of them all." Noah and his family were simply **spared** the fate of their generation, while Abraham went so far as to "take the reward" of his predecessors. What is this concept of taking someone else's reward, and what was so much greater about Abraham that he was able to do so?

Further, we find that the Sages often compare Noah to Abraham, invariably finding Noah inferior. Scripture states, "Noah was a righteous man; he was perfect in his generation" (Genesis 6:9). The Midrash, noting the phrase "in **his** generation," makes the following comment:

Some interpret this favorably: Even in that wicked generation he was righteous, how much more so had he lived in a generation of righteous people. Others interpret this unfavorably: Compared to that wicked generation he was righteous, but had he lived in Abraham's generation, he would have counted for nothing. (See Rashi to that verse, based on Midrash Tanchuma.) The Sages evidently see some point of comparison between these two great men. Noah was great, but his greatness must always be viewed in light of Abraham's far superior greatness. What precisely is the distinction the Sages intend to convey?

Another issue with our mishna is as we raised above -- the concept of "taking" someone else's reward -- which Abraham merited to do while Noah did not. How can one person receive someone else's reward? Doesn't G-d's justice system reward and punish each person exactly according to what he or she deserves? How could a righteous person -- certainly rewarded fully for his own righteousness -- receive someone else's reward as a bonus? This concept becomes even more perplexing when we consider that the wicked person does not even **have** good deeds for the

righteous one to take! Didn't the Sages just say they were wicked? If so, what does it mean that Abraham took their reward? **What** reward? They never earned any to begin with!

(In truth, the Talmud too mentions such a concept. Hagigah 15a writes as follows: Every person has two portions -- one in the World to Come and one in Purgatory. If the righteous person merits, he acquires his portion in the World to Come and that of his wicked fellow. If the wicked person becomes liable, he acquires his portion in Purgatory together with that of his righteous fellow. So there is some spiritual concept of "zoning" -- that plots in the Hereafter are subdivided into preordained shares (which one may claim with the right "deeds"). ;-) But again, what claim does the righteous person have to reward for deeds he or she did not perform?)

Let's begin with our first issue. What is the point of comparison between Noah and Abraham? I believe it is most evident in the manner in which they related to the rest of the world. How did Noah react when first confronted with the imminent destruction of mankind? He built a boat. His first reaction was self-preservation. In doing so, of course, he was following G-d's command -- to the letter: constructing the ark, gathering food, caring for the animals -- saving his family as well as the animal kingdom for a new beginning.

Noah did not, however, do one thing: We do not find him praying to G-d to **save** his wicked generation. Nor is there more than occasional reference in the Midrash to his effort to bring his generation to repentance. His role was much more passive -- following G-d's orders, allowing G-d to carry out His plans of destruction while safeguarding himself and his family. Although the Midrash does state that Noah warned the people -- and this was in part G-d's intent in having Noah publicly construct such a huge watercraft nowhere near any water (G-d has many other ways of saving people -- or destroying a world for that matter) -- this seems less Noah's primary role -- not in his earlier life nor in the period preceding the Flood. For the most part, Noah lived the private, insulated life of the pious, neither being influenced by -- nor influencing -- the wicked of his day. His life's work -- and his main fulfillment -- came in the sheltered environment of the sealed ark.

Abraham was very different. He was a man among men. He and his wife Sarah not only discovered G-d themselves, but made it their life's mission to teach the world about Him -- to spread the truth and beauty of G-d's ways to all who would hear. Their house was open to all. All guests and travelers would be fed and cared for, and would then be enlightened as to the true source of the food they had just been graced with (Talmud Sotah 10b). And when others were threatened -- even the wicked people of Sodom -- Abraham dropped all and prayed. He **challenged** G-d's resolve to destroy Sodom -- to the point of "bargaining" with G-d for their salvation (see Genesis 18:20-33).

For this reason both Abraham's and Sarah's names were changed by G-d: Abraham went from "Avram" -- father of the nation of Aram, to "Avraham" -- father of a multitude of nations. Sarah went from "Sarai" -- **my** noblewoman, to "Sara" -- noblewoman (to all). Each transcended his or her role of being an individually or nationally great person to become leader -- and caretaker -- of the entire

world.

As a result Abraham, as well as Sarah, became worthy of "taking the reward" of the wicked of their time. The commentator Rashi explains here that Abraham received the reward the wicked people **would have received** had they heeded Abraham's advice and repented. We can now understand. Abraham tried his best to bring others to repentance. Perhaps everyone he came in contact with did not follow -- but Abraham was not faulted for that. He did his utmost to influence them for the better. As far as he was concerned, they **did** repent (in fact many did thanks to Abraham and Sarah) - and Abraham and Sarah had brought the world that much closer to G-d. If others did not heed Abraham's wise advice, they had sacrificed their own share of eternity. Abraham had done his part. He had earned their share of eternity -- the share he had done everything in his power to bequeath to them.

So Abraham and Sarah transcended their roles. They were not merely individually great people, living lives of sheltered asceticism. They achieved an infinitely more sublime level of G-dly service: they lived for mankind. They saw their life's mission as sharing the wonderful and wondrous knowledge of G-d they had acquired with all who would hear. They became instructors and role models to the world. And so would G-d establish as the mission and calling of their descendants. The Jewish nation would carry the message of monotheism, of a just, moral -- and personal -- G-d to mankind. We were not only to be righteous. We were to become "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6), lighting the world with knowledge of G-d through our teachings and righteous, godlike example. And so, Abraham and Sarah's legacy and life-mission would be perpetuated for all future generations.

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