

UNDERSTANDING THE FAITH OF NOACH

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. Understanding Noach's Challenge

The Torah tells us that Hashem commanded Noach to build a Tevah (Ark) according to specific dimensions. The project of building the Tevah and the gathering of all the food that was meant to feed the species who were to enter the Tevah took Noach 120 years. The Torah states, "Noach did according to everything G-d commanded him, so he did." Rashi explains that this verse is referring to the fact that Noach followed Hashem's instructions regarding the building of the Tevah exactly. The question is why does the Torah need to tell us that Noach did exactly as Hashem commanded him? Why would think otherwise since the Torah tells us that Noach was devout and perfect in all of his generations?

When the Torah refers to the Choke (Statute) of the Par Adumah (Red Heifer) it expresses itself as, "Zos chukkas ha'Torah (This is the Statute of the Torah)." The Midrash tells us that the Statute of the Par Adumah was not comprehensible even to Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon (who is the wisest man to ever live). As he states in Ecclesiastes, "It is beyond me." Meaning although we, as human beings, may have difficulty understanding this Statute we must follow it without question because it is the Decree of Hashem. Rashi cites the Midrash- "It is My decree and you have no right to question it." The Statute of the Red Heifer is beyond human comprehension because the service of the Par Adumah, which is the process of removing the spiritual impurity of the contamination of the dead, purifies the person who was contaminated and contaminates the person who is in a pure state... If the Par Adumah inherently has the ability to purify then why does it contaminate the person who is pure? This contradiction exists only in the human realm; however, in the Divine realm there is no contradiction. Therefore the Torah states, "This is THE decree" - meaning that we must adhere to it regardless of our lack of understanding.

The specifications of Noach's Ark were approximately six hundred feet in length and one hundred feet in width and sixty feet in height. This Ark was meant to contain two of every non-Kosher species (including all reptiles, insects birds, domesticated and undomesticated animals) land and seven of every Kosher species, in addition to Noach and his family. It would seem that it is impossibility for this limited structure to accommodate this endless number of creatures. The building of the Ark would be an exercise of futility since something of a limited dimension cannot contain something beyond its capacity. It should have been reasonable that Noach would have had difficulty assuming

this endeavor of the Ark because of the impossibility of its reality. Noach with unswerving faith in Hashem immediately began building the Ark. This is the meaning of the verse, "Noach did according to everything G-d commanded him, so he did."

The Midrash tells us that one of the reasons Noach built the Ark over 120 years was so that the people of the generation should see him building it and ask him -what it's the purpose of this structure? By engaging in dialogue with the members of his generation, Noach would have the opportunity to alert them to the pending world destruction if they do not make corrections in their lives and do teshuvah (repent). Noach built the Ark despite the ridicule that he would receive when he would respond that the purpose of the Ark was to accommodate an endless number of living species - which was physically impossible. Noach nevertheless did not waiver and was not deterred.

On a human level, one is able to understand the Splitting of the Sea because it is simply a question of parting the waters (which is not beyond Hashem's ability); however, putting thousands of gallons of water into a three-ounce cup is beyond the human capacity to comprehend. One of the miracles which took place in the Bais HaMikdash (The Temple) was that although on Yom Kippur all those who were present in the Sanctuary stood pressed together - when they heard the pronouncement of the Name of Hashem by the High Priest, all those present prostrated themselves to their full length without any difficulty. The Bais HaMikdash in the physical context had a specific dimension; however, vis-à-vis its functionality it had an unlimited capacity.

We are limited to the physical realm and cannot comprehend anything beyond that. Noach was able to negate his understanding to such a degree that he was able to follow the Dictate of Hashem regardless of his inability to comprehend the impossible. This aspect of Noach's greatness is being communicated to us by the verse, "Noach did according to everything G-d commanded him so he did."

In life we face situations that are not comprehensible; however, if Hashem says that events will unfold in a certain manner then we accept them as fact. For example, at the end of time the Jewish people will confronted by all the nations of the world at the time of the Armageddon and ultimately we will defeat them. How is it possible that relatively speaking a handful of people are able to defeat an unlimited enemy? The answer is that if this is what Hashem has communicated to us through the Prophets then it will take place in its proper time. This is something that goes unquestioned. This is the perspective that a Jew must have. Noach is building the Ark, according to the specifications prescribed by Hashem to accommodate an unlimited number of animals, is the equivalent of following the Choke (Statute) of the Red Heifer.

2. The Importance of Identifying the Tzaddik

The Portion of Noach begins, "These are the offspring of Noach..." Then, the Torah digresses by saying, "Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noach walked with G-d." Rashi addresses the question - if the Torah intended to discuss the offspring of Noach, then why interject a

description of Noach as a righteous man. He cites Chazal, based on a verse in Mishlei (Proverbs), "A tzaddik must be remembered in a context of blessing." Meaning, once a tzaddik is mentioned one must describe his praiseworthiness. Therefore, when the Torah mentions Noach it must state, "Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generations..." How do we understand this principle stated by Shlomo HaMelech in Proverbs? The verse from Mishlei concludes, "The names of the Evil should rot" - in other words should be blotted out.

Rabbeinu Chananel (one of the early commentators) asks a question, "Since Hashem knows the future then why did He bring tzaddikim into existence when He already knows that the tzaddik will succeed?" Why must the tzaddik experience all of the difficulties of life if Hashem knows that he will succeed despite them? The evil person must come into existence because he can only be culpable for his sins if he actually chooses to transgress. Rabbeinu Chananel answers that the tzaddik does not exist for his own sake. Rather, he exists to be the role model for all humanity so that a true model of goodness can be observed. Therefore, the tzaddik needs to exist in order to exemplify righteousness in the world. However, if he is an unknown entity, humanity will not understand true goodness nor have the ability to choose between good and evil. Therefore Shlomo HaMelech states in Mishlei that when we speak of a tzaddik he should be identified as such and his praiseworthiness and specialness should be made known. It is not enough to mention Noach and then describe his offspring. The Torah must identify Noach as the tzaddik so that the world can appreciate him as the role model of devoutness since that is his purpose in existence.

The Torah mentioned the righteousness of Noach in the context of fathering his children so that we can understand why they merited surviving the Great Flood. The offspring survived only in the merit of their father. As Rashi explains in the Portion of Bereishis (Genesis), the offspring of Noach were considered "minors" because they were less than one hundred years old at the time of the Great Flood (before the Flood anyone less than one hundred years old was considered a minor).

3. The Relevance of Noach's Righteousness to Mankind

As we said earlier, Rashi cites the Midrash's explanation that when one mentions a tzaddik one should acknowledge his praiseworthiness. If the Torah wanted to highlight this special dimension of Noach, then why not simply start the Portion with, "Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noach walked with G-d" and then discuss the offspring of Noach? Why interrupt one statement with the other? Evidently, there must be a connection between the importance of the "offspring" of Noach and his classification as a tzaddik.

All of the families that descended from Adam perished in the Great Flood except for Noach and his family. Therefore, in essence Noach is the father of all mankind and is the antecedent of all humanity; all the characteristics that he possessed were inherited by his descendents. Every human being, both Jew and non-Jew have relevance to the potential of Noach. At this point, it is important to acknowledge Noach as the tzaddik because it informs us about the characteristics which mankind

inherited from him and therefore we all have the chance to be the tzaddik.

The potential of every non-Jew is demonstrated by the righteousness of Noach. The potential of every Jew is even greater because he also has relevance to the spiritual characteristics and accomplishments of the Patriarchs - Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov from whom every Jew descends. The Rambam states in Hilchos Teshuvah (The Laws of Teshuvah), "Every human being has the ability to choose the good path to be the tzaddik. Additionally, every person also has the ability to choose the evil path and become a rasha. Let it not pass into your mind, like the fools of the nations of the world say, that Hashem has predetermined who will be the tzaddik or who will be the rasha. There is no basis to this. Every person can become a tzaddik like Moshe Rabbeinu or a rasha like Yiravam Ben Nevot."

The Torah first tells us "These are the offspring of Noach..." to inform us that all mankind descends from Noach. Then the Torah describes Noach's spiritual status as perfect and as the tzaddik in order to inform us that this is within the potential of Man vis-à-vis free choice. Every person has relevance to achieve a level of righteousness as Noach did and every Jew has relevance to the spirituality of the Patriarchs. As the Tanach D'Eei Eliyahu states, every Jew should ask himself, "When will my accomplishments be as great as my Forefathers - Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?" These are the standards that we should aim to achieve.

4. Noach's Level of Faith

After the 120-year project of building the Ark was complete, the Torah states, "Noach, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives with him, went into the Ark because of the waters of the Flood." Rashi cites Chazal, who explain that Noach was deficient in his faith because he questioned if the Great Flood would actually take place. In fact, Noach did not enter the Tevah until he was forced to because of the Floodwaters. The Torah clearly states the fact that Noach only entered the Tevah under duress. A previous verse states, "And Noach did according to everything that Hashem had commanded him." Rashi explains that this verse is telling us that Noach entered the Tevah as Hashem commanded him. The question is how do we reconcile these two verses? One indicates that Noach had complete faith in Hashem because he entered the Ark as Hashem commanded him; the latter tells us that he only entered the Ark under duress because of the Floodwaters.

Over the course of the 120-year period when Noach was building the Tevah, the members of his generation would approach him every year and ask him, "Why are you building this Ark?" Noach would respond by telling them, "Hashem will bring a Flood upon existence in 120 years if mankind does not do teshuvah." On the 120th anniversary of the building of the Ark, the members of his generation approached Noach and asked him, "Where is the Flood that you have been telling us about?" Noach did not know what to respond. He was in a quandary not knowing if it would actually happen.

Prior to the Flood all of the species of animals, and all living creatures, began to flock to the Tevah

from all four corners of the earth. Every species of creature in existence entered the Ark, which was a sight never seen before. One would think that upon witnessing such a miracle that the people of Noach's generation would understand that the end was approaching as Noach predicted. However, they did not respond. After all of the creatures were in the Tevah it began to rain and the people still did not take this as an indication that the end of existence was at hand nor did they do teshuvah. Because they did not make the necessary corrections, they were destroyed by the Floodwaters together with existence.

On the other hand, although Noach initially questioned whether the Flood would occur or not, nevertheless he understood that the end was near when the Floodwaters began to rise. It was his choice to process that final experience in its proper context and enter into the Tevah. Unlike the members of his generation, who were obstinate and refused to acknowledge the Hand of Hashem.

We may experience difficult times in our lives, which could in fact be the basis for a turning point to do teshuvah. Often when a person is subjected to hardship, he turns to Hashem and mends his ways. However, this is not necessarily the case. Many people do not recognize their shortcomings nor do teshuvah even if they have suffering in their lives. However, even if a person is forced into doing teshuvah because of his hardships, that teshuvah still has value. The reason for this is that although it is done under duress, nevertheless it is attributed to his acknowledgement and understanding that difficulties emanate from his spiritual failings. This is why the Torah goes out of its way to tell us, "Noach, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives with him, went into the Ark because of the waters of the Flood" to indicate that Hashem values when we do the right thing despite the fact that it is done under duress. The Kindness of Hashem is like a parent to a child. The moment the child makes a move to correct his ways, (despite the parent's involvement behind the scenes), the parent will value the child's teshuvah and accept him immediately.

5. Noach's Inability to Acknowledge his Failure

Rashi cites Chazal, who explain that Noach was a small believer because he doubted if the Great Flood would actually occur. Therefore, the Torah tells us that Noach needed to be forced into the Ark by the Floodwaters. Noach devoted 120 years of his life to building the Ark and gathering all of the food that was necessary for the animals. On the 120th anniversary of Noach's project, an endless species of animals began to enter the Ark indicating that the end of existence was near, just as Hashem had told Noach. Nevertheless, Noach resisted until he was forced to enter by the rising Floodwaters. Evidently, Noach believed that the Flood was not going to occur. How do we understand this?

Perhaps Noach believed that because Hashem is All Merciful he would not destroy the world despite the failings of his generation. The only reason Noach initially built the Ark was to engage them in dialogue so he could convince them to do teshuvah - under the threat of destruction. Before the Floodwaters actually began to rise, Noach had difficulty believing that the destruction of the

world was going to occur.

Another understanding is that since Hashem had told Noach that the Flood was only going to occur if the people of his generation did not repent and correct their ways, his mission and responsibility was to influence them to do teshuvah and avert the destruction of existence. The Prophet refers to the waters of the Flood as "Mai Noach - the waters of Noach" indicating that since Noach failed in his mission, the world was being destroyed by the Great Flood. Because Noach was a tzaddik who was perfect in his generations and intimate with G-d, he had the potential to succeed at his mission of influencing the world positively. However, he did not succeed despite all of his efforts. After 120 years, Hashem told Noach to enter into the Ark indicating that he had failed in his mission. The destruction of the world was due to his failing. Noach had difficulty accepting that he failed in his mission because he knew that he had been capable of turning his generation around. Therefore, Hashem had to force Noach to understand that he had failed through the rising of the Floodwaters.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that when Moshe Rabbeinu became frustrated with leading the Jewish people by himself, Hashem told him to appoint seventy elders to assist him. Moshe used a lottery method to determine who would be the seventy elders to assist him. Given the number of eligible people, Moshe wrote the word "elder" on seventy pieces of parchment and wrote nothing on two of them. Moshe chose seven elders from each of the twelve tribes and had them draw lots. The seventy who had drawn lots with the word "elder" were chosen while the two who drew the blank lots were told by Moshe, "Hashem has no interest in you." Although every one of the seventy-two individuals seemed to have met the grade as an elder, nevertheless the two that were rejected were blatantly told that they were not qualified and had no choice but to accept that reality.

Korach, a Levite by birth, was a wise elder and the wealthiest Jew, believed that after Moshe and Aaron, he was the most qualified for the appointment. When Korach was not chosen to be the leader of the Levites and was passed over by a younger cousin, he was incensed. He could not accept the fact that it was due to his own spiritual deficiency. Rather, he attributed it to nepotism and thought that Moshe deliberately passed him over. Because of his unwillingness to accept the fact that Hashem rejected him, he attempted to usurp Moshe's authority, which in fact would have destroyed the Jewish people.

Noach could not accept that he, the tzaddik of the generation, had not succeeded in influencing the people of his generation to do teshuvah. Noach's ego prevented him from willingly admitting failure and from entering the Ark upon the command of Hashem. He had to be forced by the Floodwaters to accept failure.

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