

NOT BETTER OR WORSE, JUST DIFFERENT

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"These are the products [children] of Noach; Noach was a righteous man, pure in his generation, and he walked with G-d." [6:9]

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchoki) quotes Talmudic sources that offer two ways to understand "pure in his generation." Some say that this praises him: he was pure and righteous even in such a terrible era, and had he lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have been still better. Others, however, view this as a strong criticism: compared to his generation, he was righteous - but "had he lived in the era of *Avraham*, he would have been nothing."

Rabbi Dovid Mayer, Rosh Yeshiva in *Bais Binyomin*, Stamford, CT, notes that this is somewhat amazing. Let us accept that *Noach* would not have measured up to *Avraham*. Fine - but even so, how could he be considered nothing?

The answer, he said, is found in *Rashi's* next comment, on the words "and he walked with G-d." Concerning *Avraham*, G-d says that "he walked before Me" [24:40] - and that is the difference. *Rashi* explains that *Noach* needed support, whereas *Avraham* strengthened himself and maintained his righteousness by himself. *Noach* could not have been who he was without help.

Imagine, said Rabbi Mayer, a champion marathon runner who finishes a race in just over two hours. Another, much less experienced runner, takes nearly four hours - but that allows us to make a comparison between the faster and slower runner. The slower runner is not as good, but we can credit him with finishing the race.

Now then we have a bright guy who wants to finish quickly, so he goes through the race riding a bike. He threads his way through the runners (ringing that little bell on the handlebars), and finishes in no time at all. Do we give him a prize? Obviously, there's simply no way to compare the champion runner with this guy and his Schwinn.

That, said the Rabbi, is the difference between *Avraham* and *Noach*. *Noach* would be considered "nothing" because he's simply not in the same league. *Avraham* was who he was despite a series of trials that would have broken any lesser person - including *Noach*. And yet he "walked" on his own.

A person's stature is not determined merely by his or her "level," but by how that level was achieved.

A bike rider is not a marathon runner, even though both have gone the distance.

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