

NOT JUST DESPITE, BUT BECAUSE OF!

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

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

As Rashi points out, the Torah's careful emphasis upon Noach having been pure "in his generation" is the subject of a dispute in the Talmud [Sanhedrin 108a]. Reish Lakish explains this in a very positive way -- that Noach was righteous even though he lived in a very lowly generation, and had Noach lived among other righteous individuals, he would have been still greater. Rebbe Yochanon, however, casts this in a negative light -- that Noach was righteous according to his generation, but had he lived in a generation such as that of our forefather Abraham, he would not have been considered anything special.

Rabbi Yosef Yoizel Horowitz asks: considering that the Torah is busy complimenting Noach, why should we explain this as a negative? What do we need this for? "He was a righteous man, and he walked with G-d. But you should know, he wasn't really that great. I mean, considering his generation he was terrific -- but if he'd lived in Abraham's generation? Ach... nothing special!" It sounds like the original backhanded compliment.

Rav Horowitz explains, however, that Rebbe Yochanon is telling us that Noach was righteous because of his generation. Noach reacted when he saw the evil and immoral behavior around him, and he perceived an obligation to rise above it. He strengthened himself and resisted the path of his generation to the Nth degree, rising to become pure and righteous. Had he lived in the generation of Abraham, surrounded by Abraham and his followers, then that which inspired him to become so great would not have existed, and he would have never been so inspired.

When we see immorality around us, he concludes, this must motivate us all the more to purity and righteous behavior! And if he said this one hundred years ago, we can only imagine what he would say today...