

# TOO PERFECT

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

*Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generations. (6, 9)*

[The verse says that Noach was a righteous man in his generation.] Some of our Sages understand this to be in praise of Noach: Even in his wicked generation he was a tzaddik - imagine how much greater he would have been in a time of righteous people! Other Sages see this as an [indirect] criticism: In his generation he was considered a tzaddik [relative to the corruption surrounding him], but had he lived in the time of Avraham - he would not have been important. [Rashi]

While teaching Chumash this week, one of my students asked the following: The pasuk (verse) says Noach was a perfect tzaddik ("a tzaddik, perfect in his times"). Perfection implies absolute completeness. How is it possible (as in Rashi's second explanation) to qualify perfection by its time period?

It is also significant that Rashi chooses to make this point by contrasting the righteousness of Noach to that of Avraham. What aspect of Avraham's righteousness was lacking in Noach?

There is no doubt that Noach spent all his days and years serving Hashem to the greatest of his ability. If fault is to be found with Noach, mefarshim (Torah commentators) write, it is in his lack of attempting to change the corrupt ways of his generation. Noach, having seen their corruption, rightly wanted nothing to do with them. Any contact, he reckoned, could only be detrimental. "Woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbour," says the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 3:12). As much as possible, he distanced himself from his contemporaries.

Avraham, too, found himself living in a time of wickedness and pagan worship. Yet this did not deter him from attempting to bring his fellow man under the "Wings of Hashem's Presence." Even on the painful third day after his bris milah (circumcision), Avraham stood outside in the blazing heat, looking for travellers to bring into his tent, where they would be treated to a meal, and be taught how to bentsch (recite Grace after Meals), initiating them on a path to discover their Creator. In this way, Avraham succeeded in teaching many thousands about the One and Almighty G-d. This is why Avraham came to be known as Av Hamon Goyim/The Father of Many Nations.

Did Avraham's contact with his generation detract from his personal growth? Likely it did. There is no denying that had Avraham locked himself in a room, studying Torah and pouring out his heart in prayer day and night, he would have reached even greater levels of personal growth. But personal growth was not Avraham Avinu's only ambition. Equally important was to bring others close; to teach

them belief in Hashem and morality.

Perhaps, then, Noach's perfection was also his deficiency. He was too perfect. He did not experience the pitfalls and problems of dealing with people not up to his spiritual standard, because he chose largely to ignore them. His spiritual growth was tremendous. But had he been in the generation of Avraham, who acquainted thousands upon thousands with the name of the Almighty, Noach's secluded perfection might not have carried the same importance.

It is written (Koheles/Ecclesiastes 7:20), "For there is no righteous man on the earth that does [only] good and does not sin." Note that the pasuk emphasizes a righteous man \*on the earth\*. For a tzaddik who leads his life on the earth - paying attention to his surroundings and looking for opportunities to bring his peers closer to Hashem - perfection is beyond reach. He will at times have to let himself down to their level [within the boundaries of halacha] in order to communicate his message and gain their trust.

Certainly we are not advocating dropping personal growth in Torah and Yiras Shamayim (Fear of Heaven). On the contrary: It is impossible to bring others close unless one feels good about his own situation and relationship with Hashem. But sometimes it is valuable to sacrifice a measure of our own growth and personal development in order to help bring others closer.

Imagine you have just discovered an untapped mineral which brings health and healing to all who use it. You have a choice: You can either travel the world spreading your momentous message, or you can stay home and keep it to yourself. While travelling, you will be able to continue your own treatments, but they may be diminished somewhat by your busy schedule. Isn't the "price" of your own small sacrifice worth the potential "profit" of bringing health and well-being to others?

One who truly loves Hashem, who has perceived the magnificent life that a Torah-observant Jew lives, can not help but want to spread Hashem's word to his peers and acquaintances. "Taste and you will see," he pleads, "that Hashem is good! Fortunate is the man who takes refuge in him (Tehillim 34:9)." He does not reach out because it is a mitzvah to do so. Like one who has just had an amazing experience and aches to share it with others, he eagerly teaches Torah to all who are willing to listen.

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