

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE WORLD TO COME

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Rashi, at the beginning of this week's parsha, brings two possible explanations of the Torah's statement (6:9): "Noach was a completely righteous man in his generations":

There are those Rabbis who saw this [qualifying statement "in his generations"] in Noach's praise - Were he to have lived in a generation of [other] righteous people, he would have been all the greater! Others see this as a criticism: In his generation he was [considered] righteous - Were he to have lived in the times of Avraham, his [righteousness] wouldn't have amounted to anything.

Why, when praising Noach, does Rashi raise the possibility of Noach having lived, "with other righteous people," while when criticizing him, Rashi places him in the times of Avraham? And if, indeed, Noach was incomplete in his righteousness, in what way?

The consensus of the Commentaries seems to be that if criticism is to be found, it is in Noach's failure to take a significant interest in saving his generation. This explains why the critics compare Noach to Avraham. When Hashem revealed His plan of destruction, Noach (unlike Avraham - see Bereishis 18:20-33) did not even attempt to negotiate for the salvation of his peers. Nor do we find Noach (unlike Avraham - see Bereishis 12:5, Rashi *ibid.*) taking an active interest in bringing others "beneath the wings of the Shechinah." To me, however, it seems that there is a much more substantial and striking criticism that must be dealt with.

"And Noach, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives, entered the Ark, because of the flood waters (7:7)."

Rashi notes that the end of the pasuk seems to be stating the obvious (might we have thought they entered the Ark to take a leisurely cruise?). He quotes the Sages interpretation (Bereishis Rabbah 32:6): The pasuk is stressing that Noach did not enter the Ark until he was forced to do so by the oncoming flood waters. Why?

"Noach, too, was lacking in emunah (faith). He believed - but he didn't believe."

In other words, even after being told by Hashem to board the Ark, Noach waited until the last minute. He wasn't sure the foretold flood would indeed come to bear.

Now if we're looking to criticize Noach, this seems to be a very conspicuous fault. After all, he had been told numerous times by G-d that the flood was imminent. He had prophesied over it, and he had spent the last 120 years of his life building a massive Ark. And when push came to shove - he

didn't really believe it was going to happen?! Furthermore, why did the Torah choose to reveal to us this fault?

Mesilas Yescharim writes that a deep-rooted belief in the concepts of reward and punishment, and a concrete understanding of the "life" awaiting us in the World to Come, are crucial to our continued proficiency as servants of Hashem. The more acutely we recognize that after we die, we will be forced to account for every moment of our lives, and will be rewarded and/or punished accordingly, the greater the impetus we feel to lead our lives in an appropriate manner.

Do not fool yourself, he writes, that in the World to Come you will be satisfied with your portion, even knowing you could have done more. You will be overcome with remorse and regret. You will wish with all your heart you could relive your life - had you only known the depths of Judgement, and the extent of the reward!

Perhaps an example would help to further grasp this concept. Someone once asked me: When Mashiach comes, and we return to our Land, who will get to live in Yerushalayim? Who will be given a prized home in the Old City? And who will live in the West Bank, in the Galil...? In truth, I don't know the answer. But just suppose that we were being marked, each and every day: How we davened, how we learned Torah, how we did business, how we treated our fellow man, our honesty, integrity, our charity... And suppose, when Mashiach comes, that all our marks will be tallied. And when we arrive in Eretz Yisrael, all of us will receive our portions based on our aggregate marks. If you lived with great mesirus nefesh (self-sacrifice), you will be granted a home in the heart of Yerushalayim (and play host to all your [lesser] friends and acquaintances when they ascend to Yerushalayim for the three Pilgrimage Festivals). If you were sort of a run-of-the-mill Jew, you would be assigned to Ashkelon, or Tel Aviv. (Remember, this is just a mashal/parable, for the purpose of illustration.) Would we so easily dismiss a home in the "Heavenly City?"

Chazal (Bava Basra 75a) say that in the World to Come, Hashem will make for each person his own canopy (chuppah). And we will sit and look at the canopies of our friends, and see all that they did, and we didn't do, and we will be consumed with jealousy and regret. The more we internalize this concept, says the Mesilas Yescharim, the closer we are to being the complete *ovdei Hashem* we can be!

Why was Noach lax in his concern for the spiritual well being of his fellow man? Perhaps it was out of humility. Perhaps he felt that they wouldn't listen anyways. Perhaps he was too absorbed in his own service of Hashem to even notice the corruption and depravity going on around him. We don't know the true reason why. But suppose you saw someone about to bite into a cyanide-laced cookie; what would you do? Would you take some time, and calculate the likelihood of his believing you? Is it a time for humility and shyness? Of course, we would scream at the top of our lungs: "Stop! Don't eat it! It's poison!"

So if Noach really believed - in a concrete way - that his peers were spiritually poisoning themselves

every day, could he have restrained himself from rebuking them? If he truly understood that the time would come when they would come to him, complaining bitterly: How could you have let us go on?! You knew all along that we were poisoning ourselves, yet you did nothing to stop us! - Could he have made excuses, and continued living his life as if everything was fine and dandy?

Perhaps this is why the Torah chose to reveal his fault. "Noach, too, was among the small-of-faith. He believed in the concept of punishment and reward, but he didn't really believe." It's not that Noach didn't trust Hashem's word - it's that he didn't believe Hashem would actually follow through with His threats. That the wicked would be punished, and the righteous rewarded. This fault, ultimately, was the root of his other fault. If he would have had a more concrete understanding of the depth of reward and punishment, perhaps he would have done more to see that his generation not descend to the bowels of corruption.

A tzaddik once said:

Suppose you were to have two men that lived completely identical lives. Each one learned, davened, and served Hashem on the exact same level. There was absolutely no difference between them, except that, over their lives, one of them managed to squeeze-in one Mishnah more than the other. We would think that their reward in Olam Haba would be for all intents and purposes identical, or at least indiscernible, right? The truth: Not even comparable! The difference will be so great, that we will not be able to tell that they were the least bit similar. Because he learned one more Mishnah.

The more time we spend coming to terms with this critical concept, the more enriched our own lives are likely to become, and the more we will care for the spiritual well being of those around us.

Have a good Shabbos.

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