

DELIGHT AMIDST DEVASTATION

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Torah Study - Delight Amidst Devastation

Among his myriad other qualities, Noach, it seems, may also have been the world's first Talmid Chacham (Torah scholar). Into the Ark, Noach was told to take, "Of every pure animal... seven and seven, a mate with its mate, and of the animal that is not pure, two, a male and its mate. (7:2)" Rashi notes that while to us, the distinction between "pure" and "impure" animals is elementary, Noach, who at this stage was still close to a thousand years away from the Jews receiving the Torah, should seemingly have had a difficult time understanding the difference. From here we derive, writes Rashi, that Noach must have studied Torah.

How exactly Noach studied Torah before it was given is a matter of discussion among the commentaries. Some understand that since man was created with 248 limbs, corresponding to the 248 positive mitzvos of the Torah, and 365 sinews, corresponding to the 365 negative commandments, it was possible for one who attained a high level of physical sanctity to, as Iyov/Job put it (Iyov 19:26), "Find G-d from one's own flesh," - and grasp Torah wisdom through the body. Others understand that since Hashem, "gazed into the Torah, and created the world (Zohar parshas Terumah 2:161a)," thereby using the Torah as a blueprint for creation, it would be possible, by painstakingly studying the physical world, to "reverse engineer" the Torah, and derive the blueprint from the final product.

Whatever the case, Rashi (quoting Bereishis Rabbah 26:1) insists Noach must have been studying Torah, for if not, how was he to know which animals were pure, and which were impure? Yet upon closer examination, is his proof really that compelling? First of all, might Hashem not have told Noach, in an unrecorded conversation, which animals are "pure," and which are "impure?" Furthermore, Rashi earlier (6:20) quotes the Talmud (Sanhedrin 108b) that animals would come to Noach, seeking to enter the Ark. The Ark, however, would only "receive" those animals that had not "corrupted their ways," refusing to allow entry to degenerate animals. (How exactly the Ark did so? Your guess is as good as mine.) If so, isn't it possible that the Ark similarly allowed entry for seven pairs of pure animals, and only two impure animals, thereby allowing Noach to fulfil Hashem's instructions without compelling us to say he studied Torah? What is it that forces Rashi to say that Noach was indeed a Torah scholar?

The Tchebiner Rav, HaRav Dov Berish Weidenfeld zt"l, was a Torah scholar of great renown, and a

leader of Torah Jewry after the Holocaust. During the War, he lost his wife, two sons, and three daughters - may Hashem avenge their blood - narrowly escaping the jaws of death himself. Two of his daughters also survived. One of them married Rav Goldshtof zt"l, and the other married the renowned Torah giant Rav Baruch Shimon Shneerson zt"l.

One night in Jerusalem, his son-in-law Rav Goldshtof paced nervously outside the door to the Rav's study. Recently, the Rav's family had been in high spirits, after a son had been born to Rav Shneerson - a first grandson for the Rav! It was, in some way, a degree of consolation; a statement that although the Nazis - may their names be blotted out - might have extinguished the lives of most of their family, they had now begun to build anew. However, just days after the child's birth, doctors had informed them that the baby's life was in danger.

The Tchebiner Rav was sitting in his study, wrapped up in Torah study, when the devastating news came from the hospital: The baby had passed away. The dreadful task of relating the news to the Gaon had been placed on the shoulders of Rav Goldshtof.

Anxious and grieving, he knocked on the door. When it opened, he found himself standing face to face with the splendorous figure of the Rav, deep in thought. A volume of the Rashba's commentary lay open on his desk. Rav Goldshtof's eyes began to well with tears when his father-in-law asked him, "How is the child?" Without saying a word, the look on his face said it all. "It's all over."

No doubt, this must have razed the Rav's universe all over again. During the horrors of the War, he had lost the people dearest to him. Now, hoping to rebuild and breathe new life into the family, his building had once again collapsed.

Years later, Rav Goldshtof described the encounter: "I had no idea what kind of reaction to expect. When I broke the news, my father-in-law placed a hand upon the door frame, and leaned his head against it. There was a terrible silence as he stood there, absorbed in his thoughts. Then he turned to me, and quoted the words of the Psalmist (Tehillim 119:92), 'If not for Your Torah, my delight, I would have perished in my distress.'" The horrific news must have scorched his heart; his first grandchild was gone. His only refuge was the delight of Torah study. (Me'oros HaDaf HaYomi - Kiddushin 69.)

Rashi explains that the reason Noach was to take more pure animals aboard the Ark than impure, was so that he could bring offerings from them upon his exit. Let us ponder for a moment the world Noach encountered when he disembarked from the Ark. In a word - there was nothing. A world of complete destruction and devastation. No humans remained; no animals remained. There was no trace of the world Noach had known for the last 600 years. Everything had been overturned and annihilated by the torrential waters of the flood. The desolation was absolute. Think about how we felt as we saw the WTC collapsing and disintegrating, and with a shudder, tried to imagine what it would have been like to be inside. Noach had left a world bustling with people and animals, and came back to absolute nothingness. Yes, it had been a corrupt world; yet it was the only world he had ever known.

How can Hashem tell Noach, who would surely be in a state of utter shock, to take seven pure animals of each species, in order to bring from them offerings of thanksgiving upon leaving the Ark? How can He expect Noach to be in the frame of mind to think about rebuilding, when all around him all he could see was devastation and decay?

Of every pure animal, take unto you seven and seven - in order to bring offerings after you leave the Ark. From here - says Rashi - we see that Noach studied Torah. Only one who studies Torah could find within him the moral strength to gladden his heart with sacrificial offerings, even in the midst of upheaval and desolation. If not for the Torah, my delight, I would surely have been lost in my anguish.

The Torah has been, and continues to be, the "delight" of our nation, throughout our troubled history. May Hashem give us the insight to appreciate its wisdom, and take delight in its wondrous mysteries. Have a good Shabbos.

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