

NOACH - A 'STANDARD' TZADDIK

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"Then Hashem said to Noach, 'Come into the Ark, you and all your household, for it is you that I have found righteous before Me in this generation.'" (7:1)

The holy Admor Of Ozh'rov, R' Moshe Yechiel zt"l, points out a number of noteworthy particulars in the above verse. "For it is you that I have found to be righteous before Me in this generation." Why does Hashem stress that it is you, above all others? Why is Noach righteous before Hashem - a person is righteous before everyone, Hashem included. And why the stress on this generation? (All of these questions are addressed by other commentators as well.)

He explains that living as he did in a wicked and corrupt generation, it would have been easy enough for Noach to pass himself off as a tzaddik simply by dint of the old "theory of relativity" - that relative to those around him he was the exception; the man who chose not to participate in the degenerate sins of his contemporaries. No one would deny that in a generation such as his, to simply be better than the rest would be no small accomplishment - indeed worthy of the title tzaddik. Noach, however, refused to measure himself with a relative yardstick; Noach held himself to absolute standards. It was not enough to be a tzaddik before his generation - he was a tzaddik before Hashem. The verse stresses that you, Noach, were the only exception - lending the case for "relative-righteousness" all the more credence - yet you would not be lulled by the comfort of being better than the rest. Even be-dor ha-zeh, in this generation, where any small amount of scruples would have rendered Noach a relative-tzaddik, he did not make do; Noach was a tzaddik before Hashem.

This, perhaps, explains an oft-noted discrepancy in the Torah's description of Noach. At the beginning of this week's parsha, the Torah describes Noach as "a perfect tzaddik (tzaddik tamim)." Here, Hashem tells Noach He has found him to be a tzaddik, leaving out the perfection. (Aside: See Rashi who understands that one does not sing a person's complete praises in front of the person, lest he become arrogant. Thus, in the narrative, Noach is a perfect tzaddik; but when Hashem addresses Noach, he is a tzaddik. See also Kedushas Tzion who questions this understanding based on the teaching of Chazal that Noach studied the entire Torah, which means he would anyway have been aware of Hashem's description of him as a "perfect tzaddik." He suggests that perhaps Noach himself was the "yeish dorshim le-genai - those who understand this description to Noach's detriment (see Rashi)!" Noach, in his humility, would never assume that the Torah meant to paint him in a positive light.)

Perhaps the difference between a tzaddik and a tzaddik tamim is precisely this: A tzaddik attains his title relative to his contemporaries. A perfect tzaddik is the tzaddik who refuses to accept relative-righteousness, and measures himself by G-d's standards alone. Therein lies his perfection. Thus, there is no discrepancy between the Torah's two descriptions of Noach: In the narrative, where Noach is not being addressed, he is described as a perfect tzaddik. Here, where Hashem clearly describes Noach as an absolute tzaddik through the nuances mentioned above, there is no need to repeat the word tamim.

This, says R' Moshe Yechiel, explains the Torah's statement, "Noach went with G-d (6:9, see Rashi)," i.e. he always kept in mind the Absolute standard of morality with which the righteous serve Hashem, and refused to be content with the lamentable standards of his contemporaries.

Perhaps this also offers us an additional insight into the aforementioned Rashi: "Yesh dorshim le-shevach/le-genai - there are some who understand the Torah's description of Noach as a 'perfect tzaddik in his generation' in a positive light - even in his generation he was a tzaddik! And there are those who understand it negatively - only in his generation was he a tzaddik, but were he to have lived among other righteous people such as Avraham, he would not have been noteworthy."

While it is true that Noach refused to measure himself relative to his surroundings, and he was indeed a "perfect tzaddik," it doesn't change the fact that he would undoubtedly have reached even higher levels of avodas Hashem were he to have lived among, and been influenced by, contemporaries with similar interests and dispositions. Noach tried to live in a vacuum. Yes, he absolutely refused to be drawn down by the corruption that ultimately engulfed and flooded his generation, but neither did he benefit from the opportunity to be uplifted by seeing other like-minded tzaddikim, each with their own way of serving Hashem. There is no doubt that while Noach is above criticism, and did the absolute best he possibly could living in a time where he was the lone ranger, his growth was limited to the extent that he could stimulate himself. He didn't have the opportunity of going to a city such as Lakewood, where no matter how late you stay in beis-hamidrash, you're never the last, and no matter how early you get up, you're never the first. He wasn't able to glance across the shul and happen to notice a friend pouring out his heart in prayer to Hashem in the midst of a plain- old weekday shachris, mincha or ma'ariv. He wasn't able to look around him and see the exceptional kindness of Avraham, the strength of Yitzchok, nor the extreme devotion of Yaakov. No doubt being able to do so would have opened Noach up to new, unimagined levels of devotion that even the most furtive mind can't dream up on its own.

How critical it is living in a time where, unfortunately, there are many areas of Jewish life that "just aren't what they used to be," that one remember the lesson of Noach, that true righteousness is reserved for those who refuse to "lower the bar" just because it's what everybody else is doing. And that only by surrounding ourselves with others who challenge our own standards do we stand a chance of growing beyond what our own feeble minds can conceive.

Have a good Shabbos.

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