

# TAKING A HINT

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

Twice in parshas Noach Rashi makes comparisons between Noach and Avraham. The first time is in his famous analysis of the Torah's use of a qualifier when describing Noach's piety, "Noach was a tzaddik in his generations. (6:9)" Rashi quotes two opinions: 1) If in his generation he was a tzaddik—how much greater of a tzaddik would he have been in a righteous generation! 2) In his generation he was considered a tzaddik—were he to have lived in the times of Avraham he wouldn't have been important.

Two points of interest: 1) Even if it is true that Noach was a lesser tzaddik than Avraham, Chazal (our Sages) stress that the righteous leaders of each generation are equally vital and important, even when, on an objective scale, they don't measure up to those that proceeded (or in this case followed) them. In their words, "Yiftach in his generation [was as vital] as Shmuel in his generation. (Rosh Hashana 25b)" In this light, what purpose is served by stressing that Noach would not have been anything special in Avraham's times? 2) Why does the first opinion use "a righteous generation" as a basis for comparison, while the second one states, "had he lived in the generation of Avraham he wouldn't have been important?" Both opinions should use the same point of reference for their comparisons.

The second time Rashi contrasts Noach with Avraham is when the Torah states (6:9), "Noach walked [together] with G-d." Rashi notes that with regard to Avraham, the Torah writes (17:1), "Walk before me and be whole." Where Avraham is described as going before Hashem, Noach walked together with Him. Avraham's piety was so robust that he needed no Heavenly assistance—he could take care of himself, so to speak. This is the idea of going before Hashem. Noach needed Hashem's support in maintaining his righteousness; he is seen as walking together with Hashem.

Again there are two interesting points: 1) When Hashem tells Noach to enter the Ark, He says (7:1), "Come into the Ark...for it is you that I have found righteous before Me in this generation." Hashem's statement seems to contradict the previous one—did Noach go with Hashem or before Him? 2) Where in fact do we find proof in Avraham's actions that Avraham walked before Hashem, while Noach walked with Him? In what way does Avraham's higher level manifest itself?

The Midrash (Tehillim 37) describes the famous meeting between Avraham and Malchi-Tzedek (found in next week's parsha [14:18-21]). Chazal teach that Malchi-tzedek was in fact Shem, the son of Noach. "Tell me," Avraham asked him, "in what merit did you deserve to leave the Ark?"

"In was in the merit of the tzedakah (charity) we did."

"But there were no poor people there!" Avraham asked. "It was just you and your family? With whom did you do tzedakah?"

"With the animals and the birds," Malchi-tzedek answered. "We did not sleep at night. We would go from one animal to the next making sure they had enough to eat. Once we were late, and my father was injured [by one of the animals (see Rashi [7:23] who says it was the lion)]."

At that time, the Midrash concludes, Avraham said to himself, "If they were only saved by the charity they did with the animals and the birds, and [even so] for the one time he was late he was 'repaid' and injured, then if I perform charity with people, who are formed in the image of the angels, surely in this merit I will be protected from injury!" Immediately Avraham planted a tent, and provided his guests with food, drink, and lodging!

This, writes the Chida, is the difference between Noach and Avraham. Avraham hears a story—about a person who was saved in the merit of charity and kindness—and he understands from it how esteemed charity must be in Hashem's eyes. The first thing he does is plants his tent, beginning his legacy of charity and kindness. Noach didn't just hear the story—he lived through it, yet he did not learn it's lesson.

The Chida doesn't explain what he means; how do we see that Noach didn't learn the lesson?

The first thing Noach does after leaving the Ark is to plant a vineyard. "Noach, the man of the earth, defiled himself and planted a vineyard (9:20)." Rashi explains that he defiled himself in that his very first planting was grapes (who's fruit intoxicates); he should have planted something else first.

Avraham planted and Noach planted (va-yita). Avraham planted a tent (or tree for shelter) in which he could give others food, drink, and lodging. Noach planted grapes. From the first fruits of his labour, he got drunk. What drove Noach to drink? Perhaps he found it difficult to cope with the Earth he found upon leaving the Ark. It was not the place he had known. Everything and everyone had been eradicated by the scorching waters of the flood. To escape this bitter reality, he drank.

Had he been paying attention (like his son Shem), he might have found a lesson to be learned: You were saved by charity and kindness; make sure the new generation, which you head, is one built on the foundations of charity and kindness. Plant a tent, open a hachnosas orchim (guest house), and teach your children and descendants—the Earth's new inhabitants—the importance of kindness.

The two opinions quoted above, says the Chida, don't actually disagree. No doubt, had Noach been in a generation of tzaddikim, he would have been an even greater tzaddik. But had he lived in the generation of Avraham, who built a life of chessed (kindness) based on the story of the Ark and its lesson, whereas Noach—the story's main participant—failed to do so, he would indeed not have been a factor.

Perhaps this is expressed in the difference between walking before Hashem or with Him. Noach was saved by his kindness to the animals, but it was not as a result of any conscious commitment to chessed. Hashem put him in a situation which left him no choice—it was either feed the animals or suffer their wrath, as Shem told Avraham. Thus, although Noach did a virtuous thing, he is described as walking with Hashem—he did good, but only when coerced by Hashem to do so.

Avraham didn't wait for Hashem to lead him by the hand. He heard the story, and figured the rest. He went before Hashem—by finding hidden allusions how to improve his character and service of Hashem without having to be pushed into it.

The holy Zohar is critical of Noach for not praying for his generation. How was he to have known that Hashem awaited his prayers?

"Come into the Ark...for it is you that I have found righteous before Me in this generation." Hashem does not give gratuitous compliments. He was trying to hint to Noach: Kindness has the power to save. If you have compassion on your brothers, and pray for their salvation, you and they will be saved in the merit of that kindness. You too have the ability to be a tzaddik before me—take the hint and pray for your generation! Noach should have realized that Hashem was calling him a tzaddik in order to empower him with the strength of the righteous; to annul decrees. (Yismach Moshe).

Avraham and Noach—two tzaddikim, each one a giant in his generation. The difference? Noach did what was right, and he did it with great commitment and fervour, but only when it stared him in the face. Avraham knew how to take a hint. He didn't wait for mitzvos to come his way, he went looking for them ("And he stood by the tent"—looking for wayfarers that he could care for [18:1 and Rashil]).

Sifrei chassidus (Hasidic literature) call this phenomenon *remiza de- chachmesa*/ hints of wisdom that can be found in every aspect of life. "Do not be like the horse—like the mule who understands not, and whose mouth must be closed with bit and bridle and reins—they will not approach you...I will instruct you, and enlighten you—this is the way to go; I will guide you with the movement of My eye—like a man who hints to his friend through the movement of his eye (Tehillim/Psalms 32:8-9 with Malbim). Hashem guides us every moment of our lives; it's up to us to open our eyes and hearts and find the hints.

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