

SAVED FROM A RAINY DAY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Shavuah Tov, and welcome back after the holidays, which, I hope, were uplifting and enjoyable.

Not all the important lessons in the Torah are learned from what is written. Some of the most important messages are learned from what it is not recorded.

For example, the entire account of the first seven days of creation requires eighty verses. This includes the creation of man, the eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the subsequent expulsion from the garden. By comparison, eight entire generations between Adam and Noach (born in 1056 from creation) are discussed in only fifty-eight verses! That's eighty verses for 7 days and only fifty-eight verses for 1,056 years!

The Torah, a book about moral accomplishment and human excellence, "brushes" over eight generations of mankind. It only mentions them to provide us with a genealogical record until the righteous Noach. From the Torah's perspective, it is as if the eight generations barely existed.

Why? Because the Torah will later implore:

Choose life! that you may live ... (Devarim 30:19).

This means, choose to live, not to merely exist. Choose to be great, to live as a Tzelem-Elokim and beyond-to become an Elokim. Don't be just another name along the path between righteous and productive individuals. Be more than pawns in G-d's master plan for creation. It is the Noachs of the world who are important enough for the Torah to stop and talk about.

G-d saw that man's evil on earth was increasing. Every impulse of his innermost thoughts was only for evil, all day long. G-d regretted that He made man on earth, and He was pained to His very core. G-d said,

'I will obliterate humanity that I have created from the face of the earth; man livestock, land animals and birds of the sky. I regret that I created them.' However, Noach found favor in the eyes of G-d. (Bereishis 6:5-8)

Adam eventually did a level of tshuva, though he could not reverse the decree against mankind. He

fasted and prayed for 130 years, and despite his transgression, he was quite righteous. Kayin, for his part, did not end up living so righteous a life, and looking at the ten generations that followed, he was, unfortunately, more the rule than the exception.

The ten generations between Adam and Noach did not see much that justified the continued existence of mankind. But, in spite of all the corruption and moral bankruptcy, Noach lived above it all, remaining strong in his faith in G-d.

According to the Torah, Noach's uniqueness was present even at birth, having been born already circumcized. This is perhaps why his presence on earth greatly impacted creation:

He called him Noach, saying,

"This one will comfort us from the work and sorrow of our hands because of the ground that G-d cursed." (Bereishis 5:29)

This one will comfort us ... he will ease the burden of our hands, for until Noach came people had no agricultural instruments and he made some for them. The earth had brought forth thorns and thistles when they sowed wheat because of the punishment of Adam HaRishon; in Noach's time, this stopped. (Rashi)

The only question is, if Noach was born with such special qualities, then why was he considered unique? The answer is that, it wasn't the qualities that Noach was born with that made him special; it was what he did with those qualities that found him "favor" in the "eyes of G-d."

Woe to the evil person and woe to his neighbor ... (Bamidbar 3:29; Rashi)

As Rashi teaches, innocent people are more easily affected by evil people than evil people are by innocent people. And although Noach failed to impact his generation, he at least was successful at not being impacted by the people around him. This alone earned him the right to survive the destruction of mankind and the world.

The only way to remain unaffected by a materialistic, self-centered, blind-to-G-d world is to rise above it. Materialism creates a tremendous appetite for immediate physical gratification, to the point that people literally get lost in their "slices" of time (i.e., their own personal periods of history). If what counts is immediate pleasure, then the past and future have little significance except in terms of the pleasure they can help to provide tomorrow.

Noach was born righteous, but his perspective towards life was something that he had to develop and maintain. The "grace" he earned was his own; it was the broad, over-reaching outlook that took into account all moments of history-those before his life and those that would come after. It was this that kept him afloat above the materialistic society that was drowning around him in corruption.

As the rabbis point out, this is why we bless our sons on Friday night with the blessing that they should live lives like Ephraim and Menasheh, the two sons of Yosef born in Egypt, and who lived their lives there. Of all the great people in history, we chose these two role models because, like their father, they were able to rise above the society in which they had been born and raised and remain steadfast in their belief in G-d and His purpose for creation. This too had been Noach's saving grace.

Shabbos Day:

... On the other hand, in spite of the fact that Noach found grace in the "eyes" of G-d and was saved from the Flood, just how righteous he was (and ought to have been) is a point of dispute among the rabbis:

These are the generations of Noach: Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generation ... (Bereishis 6:9)

In his generation ..

There are those who explain these words as praise (i.e., had there been righteous people in his generation, he would have been even more righteous) and those who explain them to be criticism (i.e., had he lived in the generation of Avraham, he wouldn't have been anyone special). (Rashi)

From this it appears as if righteousness can be relative. One can appear righteous in G-d's eyes while standing next to those less righteous than himself, while one may seem insignificant next to those more righteous than he. This is what Lot reasoned when he begged the angel not to force him to return to live with Avraham after Sodom was destroyed:

"Please! I have found favor in your eyes, and you have increased your kindness which you have shown by keeping me alive; I am not able to return to the mountain, in case evil will cling to me and I will die." (Bereishis 19:19)

In case evil will cling to me ...

While I lived among the people of Sodom, The Holy One, Blessed is He, saw my actions and the actions of the people of the city, and I appeared like a righteous person worthy of being saved. If I come to the righteous (Avraham), I will appear evil. (Rashi)

According to this and the second opinion mentioned regarding Noach, had Noach lived in the time of Avraham, and a flood was imminent, Noach might not have been saved. Perhaps the disagreement over the level of Noach's righteousness is the basis of another one regarding the following verse:

Make a light for the ark ... (Bereishis 6:16)

A light ...

Some say this was a window. Others say it was a precious stone that provided light. (Bereishis Rabbah 31: 11)

What's the difference whether it was a window or a precious stone that illuminated the ark for Noach? The answer, perhaps, comes from the following verse:

The righteous will rejoice because they will see their re venge ... (Tehillim 58:11)

From this verse, it appears that one's level of righteousness can be measured by whether or not they are allowed to witness the revenge of G-d against evil. It's not that the righteous wait to see the evil suffer. On the contrary, like G-d, nothing would please them more than to see evil people do tshuva. However, the righteous do live for the day that all evil will be eradicated from the face of the earth. A window would have provided Noach with a view of just that, while only a precious stone would have denied Noach that vantage point.

However, if Noach's righteousness was indeed lacking, then what was his limitation?

The crisis in which Noach found himself-a generation of complete moral corruption-inspired him and drew out of him spiritual greatness. However, had Noach lived in the time of Avraham, would Noach have felt less inspired, less responsible to be a spiritual marker in a generation of rapidly declining mores?

Perhaps it is this that Rashi alludes to when he comments:

... And Noach walked with G-d (Bereishis 6:9)

With G-d ... But regarding Avraham it says that he walked before G-d; [from this we learn that] Noach relied upon G-d, but Avraham "walked" on his own (which implies a certain zealousness). (Rashi)

In other words, while it is important to be responsible during a crisis and respond according to the need of the moment, especially when no one else is around to do so, it is an even higher level of

morality to want to take responsibility even when others are there to help out.

When it comes to helping others, one has to pretend that no one else will do the job, and take command. This way, there will also be someone there to rectify a distraughtful situation. If it happens to be that someone else rises to the occasion and saves you the effort, then, and only then, can you sigh a sigh of relief—one that the job got done, and then, one that you were at least ready to step in had your help been needed.

Seudos Shlishi:

The total annihilation of mankind by the Great Flood represented a failure of mankind of unbelievable proportions. And though G-d has not since brought such complete and utter destruction to the entire world, this does not mean that mankind has not earned such Divine retribution, several times over, since the Flood.

How do things get so bad? How is it that mankind slips to such depths of despair as to lose complete touch with the meaning of life and the reason for creation?

The answer to this question surfaces from time-to-time in the Torah, but it especially comes into focus in Parshas BeShalach (Sefer Shemos). It is born out of a comparison between two very different perceptions of reality and approaches to life.

Picture the following if you will. The Jewish people have just been freed from the shackles of Egyptian slavery. Only months ago such freedom seemed an impossible dream. Picture the same people successfully traveling out of Egypt towards a land they have heard about, but never seen. Then picture this nation of slaves as it arrives at the shores of a raging sea, only to find themselves caught between the pursuing Egyptian army and the uncrossable waters in front of them. If you were among these people, what would you say to your leader at this point?

This is what the Jewish people asked Moshe at this time of crisis:

*"... Moshe, were there not enough graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?"
(Shemos 14:11)*

Such sarcasm, at such a moment?

Only the Jewish people could stand there in such a predicament, in the face of mortal danger, and make ... a joke (albeit a sardonic one). And the Torah's wit might not have meant anything deeper had this comment not stood in complete contrast to the onslaught of Amalek at the end of the parsha, and the attitude toward life his attack represented.

Remember what Amalek did to you along the way of your departure from Egypt, [how they] met you along the way, and while you were tired and exhausted, they cut off those lagging behind. They did not fear G-d. (Devarim 25:17)

They cut off ...

[Literally it means] hitting the tail (i.e., the place of bris milah). He [Amalek] cut off of the milah and threw it to Above [as an act of provocation]. (Rashi)

Amalek, according to the midrash, is the quintessential example of cynicism. Bris Milah performed by the Jewish people represents the belief in the possibility to have a relationship with G-d, both in this world and in the World-to-Come. It signifies a belief in the potential within man to live above nature. When Amalek severed the milah of the Jewish people, he proclaimed his disbelief in the potential to have a relationship with G-d. When he threw the milah heavenward, he proclaimed his disbelief in the World-to-Come, and denied mankind's potential to live a supernatural existence. There can be no greater form of cynicism than this. And as one paraphilosopher put it, "Cynics are the parasites of society."

What is the difference between cynicism and sarcasm? The difference between the two is strong. Underlying sarcasm is the belief that circumstances can and should be better; cynicism is the result of an abandonment of all hope that desperate circumstances can be any better than they are. It was Amalek's expressed belief that there is no World-to-Come and therefore no ultimate meaning for life.

Masked by the Jewish people's sarcasm was the belief that the situation confronting them should never have occurred. It didn't make sense. After all, G-d destroyed Egypt through incredible miracles to save the Jewish people. Then he turned nature upside down to feed them in the desert with miraculous bread from heaven. For what? To drown them in the sea? To kill them by the sword of the Egyptians? Underlying Jewish sarcasm is the belief that there is Divine justice, and that G-d is a loving and caring G-d.

So why the sarcasm? Because, sometimes it is so difficult to see here and now how G-d is caring and merciful. Sometimes the keys to understanding the harsh realities of daily life don't come until long after we need them. At the moment of crisis, it is hard to think beyond the immediate present and to see the hand of G-d.

This is why Amalek believes that life is random, without Divine guidance. Live for today! Conquer or be conquered! Survival of the fittest! These are Amalek's slogans, beliefs that breed selfishness and contempt for life, and which often result in the abuse of those too weak to take care of themselves. It's the easy way out of living with doubt; it renders irrelevant the need to have faith.

One can come to adopt an Amalekian attitude towards life. Giving up belief in Divine justice and surrendering belief in the World-to-Come is such an attitude, which denies G-d's existence. When mankind comes to such a point of despair, then creation ceases to justify its existence for man's sake, and, instead, it turns against him. It is not only the flood waters that prove this point, but even the "natural" causes of destruction and death that plague us to this very day.

Melave Malkah:

The end of the parsha finally brings us to the story of Avraham's life. There is a brief mention of Avraham's geneology, and the fact that Avraham married his wife Sarah (who is referred to as "Yiskah" in the parsha; see Rashi there). There, Rashi introduces a well-known concept in hashkofa:

The evil, even when alive are considered dead, whereas, the righteous, even after they die are considered still alive. (Bereishis 11:32; Rashi)

Rashi mentions this because, even though Terach (Avraham's father) lived for many years after Avraham left Charan, the parsha ends by speaking about his death. For, as Rashi mentions at the beginning of the parsha, a righteous person's true "descendants" are his or her good deeds, and they speak well of the person even after he or she leaves this world. Indeed, the Talmud states that when a wise person is quoted, his lips "move" while in the grave (as if he is still speaking!).

On the other hand, an evil person leaves little behind by which to be positively remembered, and even while he is yet alive, people wish to forget him. They may even curse the parents responsible for his birth and survival! Hence, striving to be a moral individual is not an option ... it is a matter of life and death-not just for the individual, but for society as a whole.

Have a Great Shabbos!
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