

RAISING CHILDREN: THE SECRET OF SUCCESS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In all the annals of time, Noach and Naamah should be lauded as the greatest parental role models to have ever graced the pages of history. In a world gone crazy, they managed to imbue their sons with a sense of responsibility and ethics. Surrounded by a civilization that espoused amorality and selfishness, they engendered in their children strength of character, purpose, and generosity. Noach and Naamah managed to hold their family together for one hundred years without any other support system outside of themselves and Noach's aging grandfather, Mesushelach. How did they do it? What was the secret of their success?

Rashi on verse 6:14 references the Medresh Tanchuma that G-d commanded Noach to build the Tayvah - Ark one hundred and twenty years before the onset of the flood. The Medresh explains that G-d was giving humanity one final chance to repent and correct their ways. Through seeing Noach build the Tayvah - Ark they would be motivated to ask him why he was building it and give Noach a chance to tell them about the impending doom of the world. The physical construction of the Tayvah - Ark would hopefully generate a greater sense of reality and urgency for them. If Noach, who was highly respected as a leader and prophet was going so far as to build for himself a floating shelter, then maybe there was more to his words than they had first assumed.

We know from the chronology of the Torah that Noach was born in 1056 and had his first child at the age of 500. The Mabul - Flood took place in 1656, at which time his three sons were around 100 years old. It also means that Noach had already begun the construction of the Tayvah - Ark, 20 years before his first son was born.

Parents know that the home environment is the single greatest influence in the early life of their child. What the child witnesses and experiences leaves an indelible mark on the psyche, the character, and the soul of the child. A child who grows up in a home that is rich with tradition and manifest values will have a far better chance at continuing those traditions and values than the child who grows up without them. The child who sees his father learning Torah regularly, happily giving Tzedaka, expressing patience, compassion and respect for his wife, and being meticulous in the manner that he cares for and respects his own parents and in-laws, will emulate each of those values. The child who sees his mother caring for her home and family, contributing to the community, encouraging her husband to learn Torah, to give Tzedaka, to go to Minyan, and extending love and respect to her parents and in-laws, will grow to cherish those very same values.

The organization of the Tayva's construction was as much a part of G-d's divine planning as every

other aspect of the Flood. By commanding Noach to begin the construction 20 years before his first son was born, G-d guaranteed that Noach's children would be born into a home environment rich with the active fulfillment of G-d's commands and wishes. Whereas the rest of humanity was engaged in the pointless pursuit of physical pleasures and self-aggrandizement, Noach spent his entire day building an ark as per the divine commandment of G-d. Although the rest of society did not heed the lesson of the Tayva's construction, Noach's children were profoundly affected by the example of their father's commitment and devotion.

Additionally, we can assume that the three sons worked alongside their father in building the Tayvah - Ark. It wasn't only a question of witnessing devotion and commitment from the outside. They became an integral part of the experience and were able to anchor their own search for meaning in the daily performance of G-d's commandment and service.

As successful as Noach and Naamah were in raising their own children, they were uniquely unsuccessful in influencing their society. On the other hand, Avraham and Sarah were also up against the entire world and yet they were uniquely successful in influencing their generation and the destiny of the world. What was wrong with Noach's approach, and what was right with Avraham's?

Many people labor under the misconception that Noach did not attempt to influence the people of his generation. In fact, Noach, his father Lemech, and his grandfather Mesushelach were all prophets who attempted to stem the moral and spiritual hemorrhaging of their generation. However, despite their dire warnings of impending cataclysmic destruction and doom, they were ignored.

If we contrast Noach's methods and failure with Avraham's methods and success, the difference is striking and revealing. Noach was a doomsayer while Avraham taught understanding, optimism, and purpose. Noach demanded change - or else beware of the consequences. Avraham motivated change by highlighting its benefits for self, family, and society. Noach preached punishment while Avraham enveloped people with love, acceptance, and reward. In a world filled with idol worship and egotism, Avraham, through kindness, generosity, and concern, awakened humanity's nobility.

The difficulties, which Noach encountered, and his lack of success in influencing his generation to do Teshuva is similar to the story of Yirmiyahu and the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash. Yirmiyahu was the prophet who lived through the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash and was the doom-saying harbinger of the impending destruction. The Medresh records how Yirmiyahu wondered what his sin must have been to be chosen to be the one who would have to prophesize the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash. Yirmiyahu was persecuted and hated for his message of doom. He was ridiculed and imprisoned for his constant criticism of the Jews and the terrible job of berating them for their actions that would cause the Churban - destruction. Yet, regardless of his message, the people did not repent and the Temple was destroyed. The message of doom and destruction, constant criticism and punishment did not win over converts!

In the last 30 years it has become crystal clear that the most effective method for influencing change in people is to be positive, up beat, and optimistic. As my Grandfather Zt"l would say, "We lost a generation because of the expression, "It is Shver (difficult) to be a Jew." We would have saved a generation if the expression had been, "It is Gring (easy) to be a Jew."

Our communities are filled with families and individuals whose return to observant Judaism was motivated by having experienced a single Shabbos or Yom Tov meal. Torah and Yahadus were intended to be sold Avraham's way. A good meal, a clean bed, a challenging, yet respectful conversation, and a real sense of caring and concern are methods that have been tried and tested and have been found to be effective and lasting.

Noach and Yirmiyahu were given monumentally thankless tasks. They were born into worlds that needed drastic surgery in order to be saved. The more gentler and kinder therapies would not have worked, just as the more changing and critical approaches hadn't succeeded. Yet, Noach did save his children. Noach was able to create an insular environment of positive activity and optimism within the raging sea of humanities self-destructiveness.

Noach's success is as important a lesson for us as his generation's failure. We must believe that it is possible for each of us to raise our children with a true sense of devotion to G-d and His Torah. The success lies in creating a home that resonates with music, laughter, optimism and joy. Our homes, schools and Shuls should support a environment that happily embraces the study of Torah and a life-style of Halacha - adherence to Jewish law.

The job of raising our children to be moral, ethical, and Torah observant is much easier than the job Noach and Naamah had in raising their three sons. Three thousand years of miraculous history, tradition, and Torah along with the richness of our communities is a far more supportive environment than the pre-diluvian world. However, it is our obligation to joyously weave the world of Torah and Mitzvos into the tapestry of our family's lives.

May the coming year be filled with the excitement and joy of a community reveling in the uniqueness of our designation as the "Nation of Torah, and the guardians of Moshe's final words.

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