

# A WASTED TRAGEDY

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

Noach is a very difficult person to assess. The Rabbis of the Midrash themselves were of different minds regarding Noach. The truth is that the righteous, perfect, G-d-pursuing Noach is a very complicated person. Therefore, tragedy comes forth from his behavior after the flood, just as his behavior and influence before the flood apparently was unable to arrest the world's dive into disaster. Noach certainly had the opportunity to fashion the world in his image, so to speak, after the flood. But it was not to be. The majority of Noach's descendants reverted back to the evil behavior of society before the flood. It is almost as though the flood and all of its tragedy was a waste. And I cannot think of a greater waste than a wasted tragedy. And this is perhaps the greatest point of criticism that the Rabbis leveled at Noach - that the flood and its lessons were never exploited to improve human society after the flood.

And this is the strongest point of comparison and difference between Noach and Avraham. Avraham also lived in a generation of tragedy and disaster. Believers were thrown into the furnace, morality was scoffed at, the project of the great Tower of Babel was abandoned after countless lives were lost in the attempt at its construction and Avraham was an isolated figure of Godliness in a world of paganism and evil. Yet, Avraham himself had assimilated the lessons of his generation within his being. He saw the emptiness and lawlessness that surrounded him and resolved to create a counter-force of goodness and faith that would eventually (according to the opinion of Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri in the introduction of his commentary to the book of Avot) win over half of his generation to the concepts of human goodness and monotheism. Avraham, who always lived with danger and on the brink of tragedy and disaster, never flinched nor fled. He did not withdraw into himself and abandon his role of human leadership. He learned the lessons of the generations that preceded him and did not allow himself to be traumatized by those tragedies and wasting those terrible events.

The Jewish people, the children of Avraham, have reeled from tragedy to greater tragedy in our long and difficult history and exile. In our century, the Holocaust and the vicious pogroms of the first third (pre-Holocaust) of the century, have decimated our people. They have not only destroyed us physically but they have also crippled us emotionally and spiritually. It would have been perfectly understandable had the Jewish people in our time just curled up and withered away, turning the experience of the Holocaust into a wasted historical event. The grandeur of our times is that even though many Jews have given up on themselves, have intermarried, assimilated, secularized, and disappeared, the Jewish people as an entity has followed the path of Avraham and not Noach. Not

only is the State of Israel an example of Jewish determination and constancy, but the strong development of a Torah life-style amongst large numbers of Jewish communities the world over, is a testimony to dealing with and defeating tragedy. Our Rabbis said that Avraham reaped the rewards of all of the ten generations after the flood. He saw their disasters, experienced the flames of his own potential destruction, and yet rose to proclaim a Godly world of human good and compassion. That is what is meant that he reaped the reward of those previous generations. He learned their lessons, corrected their shortcomings, and moved on to create a new world that would justify his faith. Our generation is faced with this very same challenge. Let us build Avraham's world and reap the rewards of the countless generations of human failure and misery that have preceded us.

Shabat Shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

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