

THE MEANING OF NOACH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The rabbis were not so much critical of Noach - as he is paid the highest of compliments, throughout the Torah as a righteous person - but they were wary of him. I have often felt that this attitude is born of the idea that Rashi himself states in commenting upon the origin of Noach's name. Rashi makes a point that the name Noach should not be construed as a derivative of the Hebrew word "nacheim" - meaning to comfort - but rather it is derived from the other Hebrew word "noach" - meaning, rest, leisure, comfortable but not comfort as in consolation.

Rashi attributes this understanding of Noach's name to the fact that he was the father, so to speak, of modern agricultural technological advancement and progress. The iron plow, the first great essential tool for farming developed for humans, enabling settlers to abandon a nomadic existence, was an invention of Noach. This was his great contribution towards the advancement of human technology.

Noach therefore becomes the source of human technological progress which grants us leisure, eases our physical workload and gives us many physical comforts in life. However, technology alone with all of its attendant blessings does not guarantee us any sort of mental, spiritual or social comfort. It does not console us in our hour of grief nor does it strengthen our spirit in our moments of self-doubt and personal angst.

If Noach could have achieved these goals then Rashi points out that his name would have been Menachem - the one who brings true consolation and comfort to troubled souls. Hence Noach is viewed in tradition as being incomplete - technologically advanced but spiritually wanting - in short a pretty accurate description of our current human society.

The Rabbis of the Talmud taught us that if "one tells you that there is wisdom, knowledge and skills present amongst the nations of the world you should believe him." However, if one tells you that there is Torah amongst the nations of the world, then do not believe him." Judaism and Jewish society has no basic argument against the advance of technology. We are not the Amish nor are we willing to be consigned a back seat in the drive to physically improve the human condition of life on this planet. Yet Judaism realizes that true psychological and spiritual comfort cannot be found in the latest version of the ipod.

Noach's technology can be enormously beneficial in a society that adopts Avraham's values and beliefs. But bereft of any spiritual focus or restraint, technology run wild makes our world a more

fearful place to inhabit and forces many to yearn for the good old, less technologically advanced, eras that preceded us. Noach's grand technology could not save the world from the ravages of evil that brought upon humankind the great flood described in this week's parsha.

Avraham's grand values and holy behavior almost saved the seat of world evil, Sodom. The world is Noach's world but its survival is dependent upon the survival and eventual triumph of Avraham's children, ideas and beliefs.

Shabat shalom.

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com