

NOAH'S SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The usual take on Noach seems to be that even though he was himself a righteous individual he really is not to be overly commended since he was unable - some say even unwilling - to save his generation from the cataclysm of the flood.

Since the opinions of the rabbis and the sages of Israel over all of the ages is pretty much divided on how to deal with Noach - especially vis a vis Avraham - I really cannot venture a definitive opinion on this matter. However as an individual and certainly as a rabbi I empathize greatly with Noach and the challenges that he faced.

The story is told about a great Jewish holy man (insert any favorite name you may wish here) who once ruefully stated: "When I was young and fresh out of my yeshiva training and undertaking my first rabbinic post I was convinced that I could influence all of humankind for the good. However, as I grew older I realized that this was beyond my abilities, so I concentrated my efforts on changing my community for the better.

As I grew still older, I realized that this was also beyond my capabilities so I decided to concentrate my efforts on my synagogue members solely and elevate them spiritually to proper heights. This I also discovered was not within my capabilities so I now concentrated on changing my family members for the better.

When it became apparent to me that this was also a somewhat futile effort, I finally realized that my efforts should be directed solely towards my own personal self-improvement." Though this is obviously an overly pessimistic view of Jewish spiritual leadership and its ability to change and influence people, it certainly gives us an insight into Noach, his greatness and eventual tragedy.

Noach builds his ark publicly and painstakingly over many decades. He exhorts his generation to repent from its evil ways and warns of the coming apocalypse. For his pains and prescience he is mocked and reviled, rejected and isolated. Some of his own descendants will eventually betray him with their behavior and attitudes.

It is not the trauma of the Flood itself that so depresses Noach as much as it is that somehow he has not found a way to communicate his message to his society and even to his own family. We are told little about Noach after his family disappointments upon emerging from the ark. He is apparently sapped of his will to influence others after so many years of being rejected. He sees no basic difference in post-flood humankind than in pre-flood humankind.

Avraham will also face many disappointments and failures in his chosen mission of spreading Godliness in a heathen, immoral and violent world. But if Avraham will initially fail with Yishmael he will succeed with Yitzchak. If Avraham cannot enlist Lot in his cause he will at least save him from destruction. If he cannot change Sodom he will strive to see that it is never again rebuilt.

The true test of spiritual leadership is what happens after one's dreaded disappointments have proven to have been accurate. Since Noach could not save his generation prior to the flood, he somehow gave up on the generations after the flood as well. Therein lays the undertone of implicit criticism of this great and pious person that is reflected in Jewish rabbinic tradition over the ages.

Shabat shalom.

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