

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

One can only view the entire Torah narrative of parshat Noach as being one that describes lost opportunities, of roads not taken and chances missed. It begins with the generation of Noach itself. Noach warns his society of the looming disaster that will destroy them and their world and its civilization. Either he is not persuasive enough or the society is purposely and perversely oblivious to what is about to happen to their world.

Many times in history, both Jewish and general, we are witness to the consequences of not taking heed of warnings and ignoring evident signs of danger. No one likes to listen to prophets of gloom and doom. These contrarians disturb our daily lives and its sense of equilibrium and inertia. We say that we want positive change to occur but in our hearts we are more than satisfied to have the status quo of life remain.

So Noach's generation misses an opportunity to save itself and thereby to change all of later world history. They judge Noach and his ark building project as being odd if not entirely daft. So, even as the rains begin and the water begins to rise they continue to scoff at Noach and his message to them.

The unwanted savior is usually ignored in human events. He does not fit our preconceived matrix of help and salvation and thus, though he may be accurate and correct in his assessments, he is usually reviled, ridiculed and ignored. I need not give examples of this truism of human behavior to those of us who have lived in Israel over the past number of decades.

After the flood it is Noach himself who is found wanting in this very trait of missed opportunities. The reason that the commentators have always seemed to treat Noach negatively, even harshly, is because he missed out on creating a new world unsullied by past error and sin. An opportunity such is that, essentially the same one offered to Adam and Chava in the Garden of Eden, has never again been offered to anyone else in the long history of human civilization.

Not accepting that offer, not seizing that opportunity is the weakness that dooms Noach to criticism and bad reviews in Jewish rabbinic scholarship. The Torah itself advances clearly the necessity to make correct decisions and choices in life. The Torah tells us to choose life over death, good over evil, the eternal over the fleeting.

Many times the refusal to make any choice when the correct one was patently present is not viewed in Judaism as being cautious or neutral. Rather it is viewed as being a fatally wrong choice. An

opportunity squandered is a sin and sins of omission are many times worse and more dangerous than sins of commission.

Our lives are defined by the choices that we have made and continue to make. Often times the necessity of making such choices is unavoidable for outside circumstances crowd in upon us. Hopefully the Lord will grant us enough wisdom to take advantage of opportunities presented and to make wise choices in our personal and national lives.

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