

SURVIVAL SYNDROME

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The main character described in this week's Torah reading is naturally Noach himself. I think that the Torah wishes to illustrate, through Noach's personality and his reactions to the impending disaster and to the world afterwards - the challenges of being a survivor.

Everyone who has ever survived a serious challenge or tragedy replays in one's mind what might have been done differently, and whether the tragedy could somehow have been averted. There is always, as well, that element of guilt which every survivor carries with him or her.

Noach had ample warning as to the arrival of the flood - a flood that would destroy civilization as he knew it. There are different opinions in the commentaries to the Torah as to whether Noach really tried to save his surrounding neighbors or whether he was mainly passive, hoping that somehow by publicly building the Ark they would get the message. Whatever opinion we adopt, it is obvious that Noach was unsuccessful in saving his generation from destruction.

That stark fact must have undoubtedly weighed very heavily on Noach in the aftermath of the flood. It explains his superficially strange behavior - planting a vineyard, becoming drunk and being sexually abused - but it does not excuse it. Post-traumatic syndrome is today recognized as a medical disease - a psychological and physical problem.

Almost all servicemen who were engaged in actual combat suffer from it in one way or another. There are grief counselors to help people recover after personal tragedies in their families. But Noach was all alone in the world and there was no one to help him cope with his own survival syndrome.

Coping with sad and difficult events is ostensibly the true measure of a person and of life itself. It is perhaps what the Mishna meant when it described the ten trials of our father Avraham "and he withstood them all." It was not only the trials that made him great but rather the fact that after so many trials he still stood tall and resolute, faithful and graciously kind to the end.

Avraham was also a survivor but his method of overcoming the survival syndrome was far different from that of Noach. This dichotomy was clearly seen in the past generation when the survivors of the Holocaust made choices regarding their future lives after their liberation. All of them were affected by the horrors they witnessed and in fact endured. Yet their choices as how to pursue life once more became the true mettle of their existence and personality.

Choosing life, family, faith and entrepreneurial, social and national productivity was, for many a survivor, the road to rehabilitation and normalcy. The past was never forgotten and the events could never be erased, but rebuilding life took precedence over all other factors. Adam and Noach both could not overcome the tragedies that previously engulfed them. They became reclusive and lost their drive for leadership and their ability to inspire others. By so doing, they compounded the tragedies that overtook them and forfeited the opportunity to forge an eternal people that would somehow be able to rise above all calamities and fulfill its historic mission.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

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