

PARSHAS NOACH

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

This class is dedicated by Ephraim Sobol in loving memory of his father, Shlomo Mordechai ben Yaakov a"h.

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The parsha begins (Bereishis, 6:9): " ... Noach ish tzadik ...; es HaElokim hishalech Noach." ("Noach was a righteous man ...; Noach walked with God."). Chazal -- and Rashi -- note the contrast with Avraham, of whom the Torah says (Bereishis, 17:1): "... walk before me ... ". Chazal and (Rashi) comment that, to conduct himself as a righteous person, Noach needed heavenly support. That is, he needed HaShem to hold his hand. By contrast, Avraham was able to attain and handle the role of tzadik on his own.

The Sfas Emes begins this maamar by telling us that, certainly ("be'vdai!"), in contrasting Noach with Avraham, it never entered Chazal's mind to diminish Noach's stature. (Parenthetically, note the Sfas Emes's koach hachiddush -- his unhesitating, sheer innovative power to view received texts through his own discerning eyes.)

Rather, the Sfas Emes tells us, the world had to progress with a certain unavoidable order. Thus, first there had to appear on the scene a tzadik who needed HaShem's support. Only thereafter could someone come who could fill the role of tzadik without needing HaShem to hold his hand.

Why so? The Sfas Emes tells us that the cosmos simply could not function with a tzadik like Avraham unless it had first experienced a tzadik on the level of Noach. Note: This explanation does not really answer the question of "why so?". But we may find it comforting to know that the world functions with a fixed order. From that perspective, the question of "why so?" in this context is as meaningless as asking "why so?" regarding the law of gravity.

The seforim speak of three fundamental domains in the world "Olam, Shanna, vNefesh" (space, time, and soul). And the seforim tell us to expect similar patterns in each of these three domains. Hence, we should not be surprised to see the Sfas Emes applying this perspective in the present context. Thus, he tells us that the nefesh (soul) of a Jewish person also goes through a pattern of growth in stages. The first stage is that of a child. The Sfas Emes describes a child as "tohu" -- as in Bereishis,

1:2: "tohu vavohu." (ArtScroll: "astonishingly empty". A more colloquial translation: "a complete mess.") Parents and teachers may find consolation in the Sfas Emes's certification of their charges as "tohu".

But just as HaShem intervened to save Noach and his family from the disaste that awaited the rest of humankind, so too does HaShem protect a particle of kedusha (sanctity) within a child. And that bit of kedusha can subsequently expand within the child as he/she grows, and enables him to develop midos tovos (proper behavior).

Continuing with this perspective, the Sfas Emes now refers us to the maxim "Derech erez kadma laTorah." That is, proper behavior must precede and is therefore a prerequisite to the proper observance of Torah and mitzvos. In support of this sequence, the Sfas Emes cites the lives of Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov. It was necessary for the lives of the Avos, with their exemplary personal conduct, to precede our people's receiving the Torah.

The necessity of this sequence is neither self-evident nor easily grasped. For this reason, the Sfas Emes concludes with a phrase of advice and admonition that he rarely utters: "Vedok vehavein" That is: "think it through, and you will understand!"

The Sfas Emes has taught us a two-fold mussar haskeil (take-home lesson) in an area in which he, as Gerer Rebbe, had special knowledge. First, he has told us that, in fact, people can grow in their Avodas Hashem. And second, he advises us that growth does not come in a linear fashion, but rather in stages ; i.e., unevenly. For this reason, we should not become discouraged if we see that, despite a serious effort to progress, we are at any given time only treading water in ruchniyus (spiritual matters). The Rebbe is telling us: Persist!

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