

A Thought on Parashat Noach 'Responding to our Times'

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



It has often occurred to me, interested and somewhat disturbed me, that great men and women must necessarily live with and resign themselves to the unfortunate realities of a particular personal dilemma. Great composers, writers, artists, explorers, scientists, human rights activists and, yes, religious leaders devote their lives to the 'Klal,' the masses, not only their contemporaries but also many future generations who will benefit from their achievements. Furthermore, the world would not be what it is today were these greats not to have composed their sublime symphonies, written great works of literature, painted and sculpted, trekked, experimented, campaigned and led with ultimate commitment and tunnel-vision devotion.

Yet, there is a price to pay for contributing to civilisation, to humanity, to the history and future of mankind, and that is the often inevitable inability to also give time to your family, and to your children in particular. It has been suggested that the word 'love' is actually spelt 't-i-m-e', and the intention is clear.

Rabbi Isaac Bernstein juxtaposed an idea in the writings of the Ktav Sofer (son of the Chatam Sofer) with a thought from the Emet leYaakov by Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky. In the comparison that is often made between Avraham Avinu and Noach, Noach generally does not emerge in a positive light. Avraham went out to people, he converted the men while Sarah converted the women (Rashi, Lech Lecha), he actively made known Hashem's Name and Presence in the world. Noach stayed at home, he did not reach out.

The Ktav Sofer wrote that he saw throughout Torah literature that Noach is condemned for not going out to his generation, teaching them, correcting them and bringing them close to Hashem. However, Noach was clever, explained the Ktav Sofer, because he knew the times in which he lived, and he knew that if he had spent time trying, often in vain, to save the world, he would have lost his own children, too. This is what happened to Shmuel HaNavi, wrote the Ktav Sofer; Shmuel spent his time travelling and judging throughout Eretz Yisrael, he was rarely at home, and his children did not turn out the way he would have liked.

Rabbi Bernstein added, you can't run around all day every day after worthy causes, and at night too, and expect your children to miraculously turn out to be tzaddikim. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, in Emet leYaakov cited a midrash which teaches, Hashem often does kindnesses to a later generation because of the merits of earlier generations. How do we know, asks the Midrash, that Hashem also acts kindly to an earlier generation because of a later generation? The Midrash answers: Noach found favour in the eyes of Hashem (Bereishit 6,8) in the merit of his children. Reb Yaakov explains that the Midrash means the following: Noach had a special place in Hashem's heart, because even in the wicked generation in which he lived he was able to keep his own children "on the straight and narrow."

(Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, Audio Shiurim, Series 1: Parashat Noach)

It is true that Noach is often compared to Avraham in a negative light. We indeed place the middah of reaching out to others above remaining self-absorbed. However, the Ktav Sofer puts Noach in a new light. He was protecting his children, and was successful in doing so, and his preference was to keep them close to himself and to Hashem rather than losing them by attempting to save the wayward criminals of his generation. Perhaps, had he tried and been successful in saving his generation he would have been a different kind of hero, and remembered as such for all eternity; but in saving his own children he was nonetheless a smaller hero, of the type that many great people do not manage to be.

There is another dimension to this discussion, a penetrating and important analysis in the Netivot Shalom ("על ספר בראשית, נח: ב"צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו"), in which Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky demonstrates how both Noach and Avraham Avinu need to be understood in relation to the specific and unique contexts in which they lived. This is an illuminating portrayal of our two great figures, which will help us immensely in our quest to understand each one, both on his own terms and in relation to the other. We shall also see that the way Noach acted was the way he needed to act, the way he indeed ought to have acted; he found himself situated in an environment which put very particular demands upon him, and the Torah's words of praise indicate that his actions were just as they should have been.

The Netivot Shalom explains that in Noach's generation the correct and appropriate means of Avodat Hashem – serving Hashem – was through יראת ה', Yirat Hashem, fear of Hashem. In Avraham's generation it was through אהבת ה', Ahavat Hashem, love of Hashem. He writes that it was only once the generations prior to Avraham had laid the necessary foundations of יראת ה' that Avraham himself could then begin to build the edifice of אהבת ה'.

Noach's job, teaches the Netivot Shalom, was to serve Hashem through the trait of fear, for that was the right form of Divine service in Noach's generation. When the Torah describes Noach as, "איש צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו" – a righteous, perfect man in his generations, it is indicating to us that Noach reached the level of שלמות, completeness, perfection, in the trait of 'fear of Hashem,' which was uniquely required in his day. Therefore, continues the Netivot Shalom, in serving Hashem through יראה, fear, Noach fulfilled the Divine will in terms his personal mission and calling as suited to his contemporary era. Moreover, had he served Hashem through love – which is in general terms the higher form of service – he would not thereby have fulfilled the task expected of him as a servant of Hashem in that generation.

Noach excelled in the middah, the trait, of 'Fear of Hashem,' explains the Netivot Shalom, and it was this particular form of service that was needed in his time. However, once Avraham's generation emerged, Noach's form of עבודת ה' through יראת ה' would have been redundant and of little value, since in Avraham's generation the principal trait and means of Divine service, עבודת ה', became אהבת ה' – Love of Hashem.

Once we realise this, we can understand the contrast in behaviour between Avraham and Noach, in terms of the extent to which each of them reached out to others. The Netivot Shalom explains that Avraham brought others close to Hashem and converted them (Bereishit Rabbah 84,2) because the trait of אהבה, love, naturally leads to such an outlook and such conduct. Noach did not behave in that way, he did not reach out to those around him, because the middah of יראה, fear is characterised by the tendency to be inward-looking; one whose עבודת ה' is through fear, withdraws into himself and does not look outwards to others or go out to them. Yet, though Noach's more introverted manner seems less commendable than Avraham's more expansive style, these were in fact the natural and appropriate attitudes of each in his own time.

Following this interpretation, Noach is therefore not to be criticised for apparently retreating into himself and to his family, and ostensibly abandoning the rest of humanity. This was simply a natural manifestation of the יראה attribute that was his allocated form of Divine service. Behaving otherwise would have been inconsistent with his personal mission and out of place in the 'יראת ה'' era in which he lived. Then came the 'אהבת ה'' era, in which Avraham – who epitomised the traits of אהבה and חסד – was indeed appointed to the task of reaching out, spreading the knowledge of Hashem and bringing others "תחת כנפי השכינה," under the wings of the Divine Presence.

Noach's generation was one steeped in *טומאה*, impurity, explains the Netivot Shalom, such that only through living according to 'יראה' – fear – could the profoundly negative forces of the day be broached and subdued. The trait of *יראה* implies an awareness that, "אית דין ואית דיין," that 'there is judgement and there is a Judge,' which is essential for living amid and withstanding the contaminating toxic influences of a poisonous society. This is why the Torah states, "את האלקים התהלך נח" because 'אלקים' is the Divine Name that signifies 'יראה' – fear – and it was in this middah, in this trait that Noach was "צדיק תמים" – perfectly righteous, and reached "שלמות" – completeness, perfection. The Netivot Shalom adds that, since *יראה* was the required middah in that generation, then it was the Divine will that He be served through fear at that time; and therefore, *יראה* was in fact greater and more lofty than *אהבה* in that era.

We now have a deeper understanding and more enlightened appreciation of Noach's conduct, in light of the setting in which he found himself, the forces that bore upon him and the particular demands placed upon him by his particular circumstances. We learnt from the Ktav Sofer that since Noach knew the times in which he lived he withdrew from the world around him in order to save his family. The Netivot Shalom taught us that such a response was in any case appropriate, since the times in which Noach lived were characterised by the attribute of fear, which naturally implied and required an inward-looking, insular disposition. Noach's instinct to isolate and insulate himself and his family now appears to be both logical and appropriate, and justifiable on multiple levels.

The lesson for us, concludes the Netivot Shalom, is that in every generation we are given a unique mission, and every age brings distinct requirements for our *עבודת ה'*, our Divine service. Each of us needs to approach his or her personal challenges in light of the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves, the conditions around us and which bear upon us.

Relating in particular to the middah of *יראה*, which we now know was epitomised by Noach and his generation, the Netivot Shalom writes:

והיסוד לכל הוא ראשית חכמה יראת ה', (תהלים קיא:)
 וכן מדי יום ביומו צריך להתחיל בהנחת היסוד של יראת ה',
 וכ"ש במצבים מיוחדים שרק בכח יראת ה' שייך לעמוד בהם.

נתיבות שלום על ספר בראשית, נח: ב"צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו" עמוד מז

"And the foundation of everything is that 'the beginning of wisdom is fear of Hashem,' (Tehillim 111:10) and we therefore need to begin every day with this awareness of the importance of fear of Hashem, and how much more so in particular circumstances in which only fear of Hashem will enable us to endure them."

(Netivot Shalom on Sefer Bereishit, Noach: p.72)

The Torah is eternal, Rabbi Berezovsky reminds us, such that in signalling how Noach responded appropriately to his times, how he acted with fitting righteousness "...in his generations," the Torah is calling upon all future generations to do the same.



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,

Jeremy