

Parashat Noach, 5775, 2014:

## *Understanding Noach*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

The end of *Parashat Bereishit* presents the incredibly dire image of the impending destruction of mankind and all terrestrial life. Hashem, so to speak, was despondent over having created the human race, since we had corrupted our very essence and being:

And the L-rd saw that the evil of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of his heart was only evil all the time. And the L-rd regretted that He had made man upon the earth, and He became grieved in His heart. And the L-rd said, "I will blot out man, whom I created, from upon the face of the earth, from man to cattle to creeping thing, to the fowl of the heavens, for I regret that I made them." (*Sefer Bereishit* 6:5-7, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The world was on the cusp of total annihilation. Yet, on the verge of this yawning abyss, a beacon of light pierced the seemingly impenetrable darkness: "But Noach found favor in the eyes of the L-rd." (*Sefer Bereishit* 5:8) Noach emerged as the savior of mankind. He found "favor in the eyes of the L-rd" precisely because he was unique: "... Noach was a righteous man, he was perfect in his generations; Noach walked with G-d." (*Sefer Bereishit* 5:9)

The Ramban (1194-1270) explains why Noach found favor before Hashem in the following manner:

The reason why Noach found favor in the eyes of Hashem is because all of his actions before Him were pleasant and pleasing. So, too, do we find [in the case of Moshe where

it states:] “And the L-rd said to Moses: ‘Even this thing that you have spoken, I will do, for you have found favor in My eyes, and I have known you by name.’” (*Sefer Shemot* 33:17) [Noach, therefore, was similar to Yosef] about whom the Torah states: “The L-rd was with Joseph, and He extended charisma to him, and He gave him favor in the eyes of the warden of the prison.” (*Sefer Bereshit* 39:21) [In addition, Noach was similar to Esther] about whom it states: “... and Esther obtained grace in the eyes of all who beheld her.” (*Sefer Megillat Ester* 2:15). Noach having found “favor in the eyes of the L-rd” is mentioned in contrast to the actions of his generation since all of their actions caused despondency before Him, may He be blessed. [In contrast,] it says regarding him [Noach] that his actions were favorable to Him. Afterwards, [the Torah states explicitly] why he [Noach] was considered good before Him, i.e., he was a completely righteous individual [see *Sefer Bereishit* 5:9].

Beyond question, within the Ramban’s purview, Noach emerges as someone comparable in status to Moshe, Yosef, and Esther. Like these individuals, he was unquestionably great – a true hero of the spirit, and a model for us all. In sum, for the Ramban, Noach was well nigh the embodiment of human perfection and righteousness.

Given the above, it becomes quite difficult to understand Rabbi Yochanan’s view, and Rabbi Chanina’s subsequent elaboration, as found in *Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin* 108a:

These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man, and perfect in his generations. R. Yochanan said: In his generations, but not in other generations... R. Chanina said: As an illustration of R. Yochanan's view, to what may this be compared? To a barrel of wine lying in a vault of acid: in its place, its odor is fragrant [by comparison with the acid]; elsewhere, its odor will not be fragrant. (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*.)

In Rabbi Yochanan’s estimation, Noach was simply unexceptional. Moreover, he was only righteous when compared to the perverse men of his time. As Rabbi Chanina notes, he was relatively good, but not intrinsically or inherently “perfect.” He was merely a *tzaddik* by default, rather than a person of authentic import.

Reish Lakish was another early Talmudic luminary who adopted a sharply contrasting position from that of Rabbi Yochanan. In his view, Noach was a great human being who

rose beyond the pernicious influences of his generation to become a true hero. Rav Oshaia explicated Reish Lakish's opinion in our above-referenced Talmudic passage:

[Even] in his [Noach's] generations — how much more so in other generations! ...R. Oshaia said: As an illustration of Reish Lakish's view, to what may this be compared? To a phial of spikenard oil lying amidst refuse: [if] it is fragrant where it is, how much more so amidst spices!

How may we understand the polar opposite views of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish? How can Noach be perceived so radically differently by two of the most famous Sages of the early Talmudic period? I believe that the answers to these questions may have more to do with these Sages than with Noach. Rabbi Yochanan was the *gadol hador* (the greatest Sage of his time). He demonstrated amazing feats of Torah acumen and brilliant analysis from the earliest days of his youth, and was the paragon of virtue throughout his life. The entire Jewish world looked to him for spiritual direction and inspiration; he was our universally acclaimed leader and Torah guide. In contradistinction, Reish Lakish was initially the leader of a band of highwaymen. When Rabbi Yochanan first encountered him, he was a powerful and charismatic thief who preyed upon the weak and unprotected members of society. Eventually, Rabbi Yochanan rescued him from a life of crime, gave him his sister as his bride, and became his rebbi and mentor. Reish Lakish repented and became transformed from the leader of bandits to one of the greatest Torah luminaries of all time (see *Talmud Bavli Ta'anit* 8a).

Perceptions and ideas are never created in a vacuum. Therefore, I believe that both Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish's analyses of Noach are the direct results of who they were, and who they had been. In my estimation, Rabbi Yochanan did not fully appreciate the trials and tribulations that Noach had endured in order to reach the level of finding "favor

in Hashem's eyes." I am convinced that he, therefore, could not completely understand the greatness that Noach had achieved. Instead, Rabbi Yochanan looked at Noach and all but declared he was no Avraham. True, according to multiple and varied *Midrashim*, Noach neither prayed for the salvation of the world's population, nor led them in a last-ditch movement of repentance. Yet, and I believe this is the crucial point, the Torah teaches us that Noach nonetheless achieved a unique and holy status in the eyes of the Master of the Universe.

In my opinion, Reish Lakish personally identified with Noach and the efforts that had been required for him to overcome the perverse and twisted ways of his time. I believe that Reish Lakish's past experiences facilitated his understanding of the level of *gevurah* (heroism) that Noach had achieved. As such, Reish Lakish viewed Noach within the context of the ethical and moral failures of his historical moment, and thereby perceived him as an authentic friend and follower of Hashem. Therefore, if Noach had lived at a time where evil did not reign supreme, he would have achieved even greater heights of righteousness. Despite the external pressures Noach faced, he did not allow himself to be dragged down into the pit of lawlessness and immorality that were the defining characteristics of his age. Rather, his entire persona was dedicated to serving Hashem. Thus, Noach was a hero who, as the Ramban notes, was comparable to Moshe, Yosef, and Esther.

With Hashem's help, may we follow the example of Reish Lakish and focus upon the good that is in others. Moreover, just as Noach's efforts literally saved the world, may

our singular dedication to Hashem help bring *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the Righteous Messiah) soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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