

Between Noah and Avraham: The Imperative to Initiate
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There is hardly a personality in all of rabbinic literature about whom one finds a greater degree of rabbinic ambivalence than Noah. For every glowing comment regarding his being selected, out of all of humanity, for survival, we find a derisive comment about his perceived shortcomings. The constant foil to Noah is, of course, Avraham, who emerges at the end of this week's *sedra*, and begins to achieve that which Noah did not.

As the Mishnah states in the fifth chapter of Pirkei Avot, while the ten generations between Adam and Noah culminated in the world's destruction, the ten generations between Noah and Avraham culminated in Avraham's receiving the reward which had been there for the taking the whole time.

In brief, if Noah was the instrument of the world's survival, Avraham becomes something much greater, the instrument of the elevation of the world through his dissemination of ethical monotheism. As the Sages say, if Noah lived during the generation of Avraham, he would not have been considered a person of stature altogether, **לא היה נחשב לכלום**.

What is the essential difference between the personas of these two figures?

Time and again, the Torah stresses that Noah responded to all of those direct commandments which God directed to him. When given a specific command, Noah is compliant, to the last detail, **ויעש נח ככל אשר צוהו ה'**. Insofar as all that was requested of Noah was to prepare the Ark for the coming flood, Noah was the right man for the job. As the Torah testifies, **את האלוקים** **התהלך נח**, Noah was capable of walking with God, in response to His dictates, in a world which had long since careened into the moral abyss.

And yet, when the challenge was to emerge from the Ark, **צא מן התיבה**, to begin to refashion the world, Noah seemed incapable of initiating. Instead, he withdrew into his own tent, and retreated still further, into an inebriated stupor. These were the movements of a man in full retreat, lacking the capacity for spiritual initiation.

In contrast, Avraham is defined by the phrase **התהלך לפני**, to literally walk in front of God, to possess the capacity to initiate, to create, to do the harder, more challenging work of shaping a world in the Divine image. Not only does Avraham transcend mere responsiveness to God, he even challenges God, albeit with the requisite sense of humility, **ואנכי עפר ואפר**, such as in the context of the destruction of Sodom and Amorrhah.

The inescapable conclusion of the comparative study of these two figures is that true service of God, perhaps counterintuitively, requires something much greater than mere compliance and obedience. It requires initiative and creativity. What God ultimately demands of us is the utilization of all of the talents and capacities with which humans have been uniquely endowed to shape and influence the environment around us.

If the defining image of Noach's existence is the sealed environment, from the Ark which insulated him from the waters, to the tent in which he barricaded himself from the world, Avraham's tent, open on four sides, evokes a completely different symbolism: a man engaged with the world, on the one hand, receiving all visitors, and, consequently, indelibly impacting all those who cross his path.