

Between Noah and Avraham: The Imperative to Initiate
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I.

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.

According to one view within Chazal, pointedly cited by Rashi, if Noah lived during the generation of Avraham, he would not have been considered a person of stature altogether, *lo hayah nechshav l'klum*.

And, if even if Ramban, and Targum as well, took an admiring stance towards the *tzadik tamim b'dorotav*, one cannot help but be struck by Rashi's further indictment of Noah's dearth of faith itself, *af Noah m'ketanei ha'emunah hayah*. Once again, the contrast between Noah and Avraham is inescapable, as the latter was the paradigmatic man of faith, self made, in the inimitable words of Rambam, *lo hayah lo melamed v'lo modia davar*, who invested thirty seven years of mental, intellectual, and emotional toil in the process of being *makir et boro*.

II.

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.

Insofar as all that was requested of Noach was to prepare the Ark for the coming flood, Noach was the right man for the job, *vaya'as Noach k'chol asher tzivah oto Elokim ken asah*. When the mandate was to enter the ark, once again, utter and complete compicance, *vaya'as Noach k'chol asher tzivahu Hashem*. As a general matter, the Torah testifies, *et ha-elokim hithalech Noach*, Noach was capable of walking with God, in response to His dictates, in a world which had long since careened into the moral abyss.

To be sure, there can be no minimizing this achievement. As Rambam writes in Hilkhot De'ot, it is only human nature to be influenced by all of those around us. As such, Rambam cites not only the Torah requirement to affiliate with spiritual paragons, *l'hidavek b'Talmidei Chachamim*, but, in a striking addition, requires a person to literally abandon society if it has become thoroughly corrupt, and to take up residence in the 'craggy rocks and mountains.'

Noach's singular capacity to insulate himself from a world that had descended to the very depths of moral debasement cannot be diminished as a personal achievement, and the significance for humanity can likewise not be overstated. At the very moment when Divine wrath had reached its maximum level, with a Divine edict to erase humanity from the face of the earth, the Torah simply and powerfully tells us, "*v'Noach matza chen b'einei Hashem*."

And yet, when the challenge was to *emerge* from the Ark, *tzei min ha'tevah*, to begin to refashion the world, Noach seemed incapable of initiating. The very fact that Noach had to be commanded to leave the ark, even after he was certain that the world was not habitable once more, is itself deeply revealing. Rashi's further insistence that Noach was unwilling to respond in the affirmative to the Divine mandate of *pru u'revu* without further assurance of the keshet once again highlights Noach's reticence to be a shaper of society around him.

Indeed a careful reading of the post flood narrative within the *sedra* consistently refers to the sons of Noach as the *yotzim min ha-tevah*, as the ones who left the ark, and shaped the world, *ume'eleh naftzah khol ha'aretz*. Noach, by contrast, only left the ark in a physical sense, but never in the sense of serving as a moral and spiritual catalyst for the world.

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. If the Almighty had compelled Noach to leave his ark, he would recreate another insulated and protected environment for himself, and recede, *b'toch oholo*.

Perhaps the most striking evidence for this understanding of Noach is that not once in the entire Torah do we have dialogue between Noach and another human being. Not once do we

encounter him interacting with a neighbor during the one hundred and twenty years which Hashem delayed the flood, awaiting repentance of the world. Not once do we encounter Noach even in dialogue with his wife or children. Even after the horrific debasement which Noach suffers at the hands of Cham, Noach blesses his older two sons, and curses the youngest, but does not engage them in any conversation.

In this respect, while there is much to ponder as far as how exactly a rarefied ish tzadik tamim could be diminished into an ish ha'adamah, an avatar of chullin, it seems that Noach never changed at all. He was always the same, insulated individual. When the challenge was to wall off society and all of its depravity, Noach was the perfect man for the job. When circumstances require bold initiative after the mabul, Noach never adjusted to a different mission. Instead, he regresses and recedes into his tent, becomes an object who is acted upon instead of a creative subject, and dies, in a classic anti-climax.

III.

The contrast with Avraham could not be more total.

If Noach retreated *b'toch oholo*, Avraham sat at the *petach ha'ohel*, in a tent which itself was open to the world, unlike Noach's insulated ark.

If Noach never evolved, never grew as a person, and therefore regressed, Avraham was constantly challenged, and responded by discovering within himself new reservoirs of faith.

If Noach barricaded himself from society, in eternal silence, Avraham, the iconoclast par excellence, shared his truth with the world, fearlessly and unceasingly. And, as he made inroads over time, he created the archetypal framework of ahavat Hashem, as defined by Rambam in Sefer HaMitzvot, of engaging others and sharing one's deep love and devotion to the Creator with them. Even the idolaters of Chet recognize this quality in Avraham, and reverentially understand him to be an authentic ambassador of the Divine, *nesi Elokim*.

If Noach complied, even to the last detail, with the Divine command, *et ha'Elokim bithalech Noach*, Avraham, as noted by Rashi, is defined by the phrase *bithalech lifanai*, to literally walk in front of God. Avraham is defined by the capacity to initiate, to create, to shape 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, *v'anochi afar va'efer*, 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.