

Parshas Noach, Rabbi David Mahler

Of all the personalities in *Tanach*, *Noach* seems to be the individual who more often than anyone else, is compared to others. Famously, *Rashi* wonders whether *Noach* would be exceptional in a generation with an *Avraham*. Would he have still stood out amongst his peers or was he simply the best of a bad lot?

Less well-known is *Chazal's* comparison of *Noach* to *Yosef* – as both are the only two people described as “*tzaddik*” in the *Torah*.

Lastly, and perhaps most interestingly, *Noach* is compared to *Moshe Rabbeinu*.

Though there is a debate as to *Noach's* greatness prior to the *mabul*, the *Torah* is far less ambiguous regarding *Noach's* behavior afterwards.

After leaving the ark with his family, *Noach's* very first act is to plant a vineyard - from which he subsequently enjoys its fruit and becomes highly intoxicated. Though the *Torah* describes *Noach* as an “*Ish Tzaddik*” at the beginning of the *parsha*, he is described in this episode as an “*Ish Adama*” (man of the ground). He falls from being a wonderful *tzaddik* to a man of the earth. He has unfortunately debased himself.

The *Midrash* notes this fall and contrasts it with *Moshe's* rise. *Moshe* is first described as an “*Ish Mitzri*” (and Egyptian man) while at the end of his life, he is the “*Ish Elokim*” (man of G-d). *Moshe* rises. He transforms himself from a regular Egyptian man to a saintly, angelic leader.

Moshe spent his life ascending while *Noach* spent his life descending. The arc of their lives is so different.

What is the message of this *midrash*?

On a basic level, the message is one of progress, of always growing, of constantly and consistently trending up. Where am I headed? Am I different this month than I was last month? If I've fallen a bit, what is my plan? In which direction is my overall religious personality pointed? Is the compass pointing, proudly north or regretfully south. The stark contrast between *Noach* and *Moshe* informs us to often reflect asking ourselves whether our own stock is rising or not.

The *Mesech Chochma* (9:20) gleans a different lesson from the *midrash*. He wonders – what was the secret cause to *Moshe's* growth and *Noach's* demise?

There are those in life who concern themselves first and foremost with their own religious life, almost to the exclusion of others. They work assiduously on their *Torah* and *t'fillah* in building their personal relationships with *Hashem*. They try as best as they can to avoid temptation in the pursuit of their spiritual development.

On the other extreme, there are people who are completely selfless. They are constantly dealing with other people's problems, lending a hand, hug, advice or solution to a myriad of issues. They are focused on the needs of the *tzibbur*.

Interestingly, the *Meshech Chochma* writes that intuitively, one would think that the former model would reap greater religious benefits as that person is almost exclusively working on themselves. They do not get distracted by others nor are they bogged down with the issues of other people.

But that is not the case he concludes. In the *Meshech Chochma's* estimation, *Noach* represents the model of one who is concerned primarily with his religious experience and in the end, he suffers a regression of the highest order. *Noach* does not seek out others to teach about G-d. He waits for others to come to him. He does not debate *Hashem* to save the world, fighting for Him to not destroy the world. He is safe. He can remain close to G-d. *Noach* is content with that. His status and standing are safe.

This might be a short-term win, but it's a long-term loss.

Moshe is the polar opposite. The beginning of *Parshas Shemos*, before *Hashem* speaks to *Moshe* at the burning bush to recruit him to be the leader of his precious nation, tells three short stories of *Moshe's* life. In all three, he fights for the underdog, the one most vulnerable. First, he saves the Jew from the beatings of an Egyptian. He then attempts to garner a peace deal between two Jews, and lastly he assists the young women at the well in *Midian*. After these stories, *Hashem* selects *Moshe* as the leader He wants.

In the opinion of the *Meshech Chochma*, *Moshe's* life-long dedication to the Jewish people is what propelled him from an *Ish Mitzri* to an *Ish Elokim*.

The more we give, the more we get. What we get is that we grow. Our shepherding of others transforms us into models of *Moshe Rabbeinu*.

May we all merit to give of our time, our resources, our love, empathy and sensitivity and may that selflessness create the bond with G-d we all so deeply need, cherish and desire.

Shabbat Shalom!