

Parashat Noach, Rabbi James Proops

The opening of this week's parasha of Noach is cause for much discussion and analysis. The opening words, which seem to introduce the offspring of Noach are followed by the curious statement “נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת־הָאֱלֹקִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ־נֹחַ” - Noah was a righteous man; he was perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God”. Rashi in his second comment on this verse, informs us that this seemingly tangential insertion is in fact teaching us a very important life lesson. He states that since after stating “These are the offspring of Noach” the Torah declares that “he was a righteous man” we are being taught that “לְמַדְךָ שֶׁעֶקֶר תּוֹלְדוֹתֵיהֶם שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים” - מעשים טובים (Genesis Rabbah 30:6)”. that the main progeny of righteous people are their good deeds

While our names and material possessions may be carried forward into the future by our children and descendants, the real legacy that we leave behind is the impact that we have on the world through our good deeds. The fruits of our labor will last long after we are gone. However, if we look closer at Rashi's comment, despite our inclination to apply this lesson to everyone, he singles out one group of people to whom this concept applies. He is very specific that it is the *tzadikim* who's actions are considered their progeny. With this distinction we can't help but wonder why he emphasises that it is the righteous for whom their *ma'asim tovim* are considered their offspring? Surely this is true for all people?

To this question the Sfas Emes, R' Yehudah Leib Alter, offers a profound and insightful explanation. He answers that it is not all *mitzvot*, or by extension all acts of *chesed* and good deeds, that can be considered among our 'offspring'. Furthermore it is not that if one happens to do fulfil a *mitzvah* then the act will be elevated to the status of progeny. Rather it is when a *tzadik*, a truly righteous person, undertakes a *mitzvah* or good deed that it acquires this special status due to the way in which it is carried out. When a *tzadik*, who's entire life is striving to be close to Hashem, fulfils a *mitzvah*, it is done “שכל החיות” with the essence of their being and entre self. In this way the *mitzvah* itself becomes part of the *tzadik*'s legacy, it becomes an everlasting testament to the person.

It is understood that each of us must strive to fulfil as many *mitzvot* as are available to us, embark on as many good deeds as possible and impact the world in as positive a way as we can. For all actions of this nature there is great reward. However, there is a major difference between an action which I do and an action which is completely me. We are all aware that I can do something which simply ‘checks the box’ and nothing can be taken away from that. I have done what I am required to do and I will be rewarded as such. It is highly unlikely however, that any action carried out in this way will have a deep effect on me or change me in any meaningful way. Whereas if a *mitzvah* or positive action is embarked upon with full conviction, intention and motivation, the act itself can have a profound and impactful influence on our lives. In order for any action to be considered a *toldah*, an outgrowth or offspring of a person, it has to have changed us in some way and will therefore leave a lasting impact and impression. We cannot hope to have our own מַעֲשֵׂים טוֹבִים considered in this category unless we approach them in the same way as the *tzadik*, with purity of motive and absolute commitment.

This can seem like a lofty goal as we try to navigate life in the generation of the ultimate distractions. It is increasingly difficult to commit to any one action without being tempted to multi-task. There is much literature about our inability to focus on the task at hand and fully commit ourselves to any one moment and this is all the more true when it comes to our *mitzvah* observance. However, when it comes to Shabbat with its in-built filters to reduce outside distractions, no work, no phone, no laptop, we are afforded the tremendous opportunity to work on our ability to be fully committed to the *mitzvah* of Shabbat. Whereas we might find it difficult to focus fully or to rejoice whole-heartedly on various other *mitzvot*, on Shabbat we can fully immerse ourselves in the atmosphere without too much pulling us away. If we are able to utilize Shabbat correctly, then it can have a profound influence on how we are able to connect with other *mitzvot* during the week despite the challenges that are present. In this way, may we all merit to reach the level of *tzadikim* and have our *mitzvot* and good deeds live on in the future as our progeny.

Shabbat Shalom