

Noach, 5782
Rabbi Zev Wiener

Few, if any, characters in the Torah are more enigmatic and complex than Noach. While Noach is most renowned for his genuine righteousness in standing strong against a morally bankrupt generation and perpetuating the survival of the world, towards the end of his story, Noach appears to stumble. The Torah relates that after emerging from the ark and offering sacrifices to the Almighty, Noach immediately planted a vineyard, became heavily intoxicated, and catastrophic results ensued.

While the exact details of Noach's apparent fall remain esoteric and unclear, at face value, it appears that Noach may have experienced an existential loss of purpose in his life. Throughout his time on the ark, Noach was extremely busy tending to the needs of others. As the Midrash (Tanchuma, 9) relates:

א"ר לוי כל אותן י"ב חדש לא טעם טעם שינה לא נח ולא בנוו שהיו זקוקין לזון את הבהמה ואת החיה ואת העופות

Rabbi Levi said: For all 12 months [on the ark], neither Noach nor his sons slept, as they were needed to feed the livestock, the animals, and the birds

Noach worked round the clock to help each of the animals, serving each animal its individual meal at its preferred time (see Sanhedrin 108b). Preoccupied with constant concern for others, he likely had little time to worry about his own pain. However, soon after he left the ark, he was absolved of all responsibility. His schedule became entirely unstructured, and he was ostensibly entirely unneeded. With no one requiring his help anymore, his life may have begun to lack purpose, and he confronted the fundamental question of "now what?" In such a climate, anyone can quickly fall prey to the many vices of the ego: nihilism, self-indulgence, and alcoholism.

The trajectory of Noach's life points to the critical role of purpose in our lives, which, by definition, always stems from service towards something beyond ourselves. While a great deal has changed in the world since the times of Noach, this essential human need, along with the resultant danger if it goes unmet, remains entirely the same. I have met numerous former stay-at-home mothers, for example, who are now empty-nesters, and feel a sense of despair over a perceived lack of purpose in their lives. In this state, some understandably fall into the false comfort of alcoholism -- in a fashion strikingly similar to what is described about Noach -- as the only salve to their pain and boredom. Similarly, it is not uncommon for people who have held long and enriching careers, especially those that involve service towards others, to struggle to recognize themselves after retirement. Despite the initial allure of golf and travel, most retirees find that a life focused on themselves may quickly become stale and monotonous.

In truth, Judaism does not believe in a concept of retirement. Of course, we may choose to stop working in our formal professions, and of course, we may slow down the pace and take more breaks...but in life, we are never “*done*.” The Torah teaches us that as long as we are alive, we always have purpose and a mission -- even if this purpose changes form. There are simply too many problems that exist in our community, right under our noses, for anyone to be able to afford to “retire” permanently and exclusively to the golf course or the cruise ship. Moreover, beyond the pressing needs of others that require our energies, every time we make space for another, subordinating our own selfish desires to the needs of someone else, we emulate the Divine, who makes space for us in this world. In doing so, we access the ultimate form of true life in this world, that brings more light to our lives than anything else.

As humans, we can survive without a lot of things, but we cannot live without a constant sense of purpose. When others are counting on us, we somehow draw deep from untapped reservoirs of strength to overlook and overcome our own personal struggles. And when we feel unneeded and focus on ourselves, we may quickly fall into depression. I am reminded of a woman I once met who shared with me that for much of her life, she struggled with suicidal ideation and required multiple psychiatric hospitalizations. All of this instantly changed, however, the moment she adopted her first and only child. Raising her child as a single mother, she realized that she simply could not afford to entertain these harmful thoughts. “It just was not an option, because it wasn’t only about me anymore,” she told me. She recognized that if she was unavailable to take her child to school or to make her child breakfast, there was no one else to do it -- and that situation could not happen. Of course, this woman still struggled with depression, but she knew that there was a non-negotiable line that could never be crossed, or even entertained, for the sake of her child. While the positive outcome of her particular circumstances unfortunately cannot be generalized to everyone facing a similar situation, her experience highlights the timeless truth that the more we worry about others, the less space we have to worry about ourselves.

Regardless of whether one lives with others or alone, and regardless of whether one feels that he or she has talent or not, every person has the ability to live a life of giving towards others. Sometimes, this giving may come in the form of having a pet, or even a plant, to tend to. Other times, this giving can come in the form of volunteering for charitable organizations, visiting the sick, and lifting people’s spirits. Even in situations when a person no longer possesses the ability to go out to give to others, his or her giving may come in the form of allowing others the opportunity to help him or her -- which is not an easy thing to do, but also constitutes a critical form of giving. Finally, whenever we mindfully perform a Mitzvah, pray, recite a blessing, or study Torah, we are also performing an extremely lofty form of “giving” -- a modern-day offering -- in which we get ourselves out of the way to serve Something beyond ourselves.

If a person's focus in life is self-aggrandizement and amassment, the world inevitably becomes a miserable place. After all, no one remains on top forever, fortunes come and go, and everyone faces struggle and loss sooner or later. But if one's focus in life is helping others, the world could not be a more perfect place for him or her. G-d has deliberately created a world with so many flaws and deficiencies, providing us an ideal environment to try to fix it. There are always endless opportunities to help and uplift someone else, as the Torah states, "כי לא יחדל אביון" -- *For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land* (Devarim 15:11). No matter what our life circumstances may be, we will never lose purpose if we constantly set our eyes on helping others. Sometimes, this is the only way to survive the floods we face.