

## Rejecting Noach

Noach 5779

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### I.

My original plan for this derasha was to justify Chazal's character assassination of Noach. But then I had to change it. I was wrong. Because Chazal, I realized, don't go nearly far enough in their criticism of Noach – he is far worse than they imply.

Let's begin with the Torah's description of Noach (Gen. 6:9):

נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלְּךְ־נֹחַ:

Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generation. Noach walked with God.

There's something very strange about this phrase. Though it seems laudatory, why must the Torah insist that Noach was perfect *bedorotav*, in his generation? It's superfluous. Why not just say that he was perfect?

Two schools of thought emerge within *Chazal* and quoted by Rashi. The first is that the Torah stresses Noach's generation to emphasize his perfection: Noach was righteous even in a world of wickedness – how much greater would he have been surrounded by good people! The second school thought, however, is far more skeptical of Noach's perfection. As quoted by Rashi:

לְפִי דֹרוֹ הָיָה צַדִּיק, וְאֵלֹהֵי הָיָה בְּדֹרוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם – לֹא הָיָה נֹחֶשֶׁב לְכָלֹם .

Within his own generation he is considered righteous, but had he lived in the generation of Avraham his merits would be worthless.

Why are Chazal engaging in such character assassination? What prompts their suspicion? Why must we question Noach's merits? Because Noach, as I'm going to show you, is the antithesis of Avraham. Noach is everything a Jew should not be.

### II.

The Torah gives two clear indications of this. The first is that the Torah describes Noach and Avraham in antithetical terms. The second is that, when faced with the same scenario, the two react in opposite ways.

I've already quoted the Torah's description of Noach. He is an *ish tzaddik*, he's righteous, and *tamim hayah be-dorotav*, perfect. And, to boot, he also walks with God: *et ha-Elokim hithalekh Noach*. In contrast, next week we will read God's charge to Avraham, just before Avraham's name is changed and he is commanded to circumcise himself. *Hithalekh lefanai vehyeh tamim*, "walk with me and become perfect" (Gen. 17:1). In other words, while Noach, by the time we meet him in the

Torah, is already a perfect person walking with God, Avraham is told when he is ninety-nine – and almost twenty-five years after he’s first started following God – to be one who walks with God striving for perfection.

Noach is perfect. Avraham seeks perfection.

This contrast is underscored by the act that follows God’s call to Avraham: *brit milah*, an act suffused with the symbolism of perfecting oneself. As told by Chazal in a well-known story in which the Roman general Turnus Rufus questions the legitimacy of circumcision, decrying it as mutilating the perfect body God has given us, Rabbi Akiva celebrates the same act. It is humanity’s way of perfecting that given by God.

But what about Noach? Not only is he not commanded in circumcision but, according to a popular midrash he was already born circumcised (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 2:5). While Avraham strove to perfect himself both spiritually and physically, Noach was barred from such actions. There was nothing about him – either spiritually or physically – that he could perfect.

And this partly explains the skepticism towards Noach. He may have been perfect, but we don’t value perfection. Being Jewish isn’t about being flawless, it’s about striving for perfection: constantly pushing ourselves beyond our spiritual comfort zones. Noach is, in this sense, a useless role model for us. Because Judaism is Avraham’s legacy – the charge that no matter where we are on the spiritual ladder, we should always be looking to climb higher. Judaism has no time for Noach’s. Judaism rejects perfection as an ideal. We don’t care for those, like Noach, who are *tamim hayah*, already perfect. Our role model is Avraham, who was told *vehye tamim*, strive for perfection. That’s what we do.

### III.

But there’s something else that differentiates Noach from Avraham, something that casts an even sharper shadow on Noach. His righteousness doesn’t seem very, well, righteous. Think of the story for a moment. God tells Noach he’s going to destroy the world. How does Noach react? “Ok.” He seems content with the decision – he has no qualms watching his neighbors drown. In contrast Avraham, when told that an evil town to which he has neither love nor care, is going to be destroyed, he begs God to reconsider. I’m going to discuss Avraham’s protest again in a couple of weeks, but Noach’s righteousness here rings hollow. He doesn’t actually care about others.

But I think the Torah is aware of this. And so, I think its description of Noach as perfect *be-dorotav*, only for his generation – in other words, he is better than everyone else but otherwise not so great – is not the only critique it makes. Its description of him as a *tzaddik*, as righteous, is facetious. Noach isn’t righteous, he’s self-righteous – and there’s a major difference between the two. As beautifully phrased by Lord Sacks in a booklet he wrote in preparation for the *Yamim Noraim* over a decade ago entitled *Letters to the Next Generation*, he writes:

Never confuse righteousness with self-righteousness. They sound similar, but they are opposites. The righteous see the good in people; the self-righteous see the bad.  
... The righteous are gener-ous; the self-righteous, grudging and judgemental.

Once you know the difference, keep far from the self-righteous, who come in all forms, right and left, religious and secular. ... (*Letters to the Next Generation*, 26).

This, in a nutshell, is the difference between Avraham and Noach. Avraham tried to see the good even in the people of Sodom, while Noach saw the bad even in his neighbors. Avraham opened his tent to those in need, Noach closed the doors of his Ark to those who were drowning.

Judaism tells us to keep far from the Noach's of the world. Never idealize perfection, it's the attempt to be perfect that's worthy of admiration. Always be suspicious of those who consider themselves righteous. Watch what they do and not what they claim.

Noach *ish tzaddik tamim hayah be-dorotav*. Noach was "righteous" and, for his generation he was perfect enough. But we care about Avraham. We reject the perfect. It's the striving that we admire.