

The Challenge of an Upward Trajectory of Religious Growth

In Bereishit Rabba (36:3) Rav Berachya suggests that the Torah prefers Moshe over Noach. His proof is that when we are first introduced to Noach we are told that he was “a righteous man” but at the end of the story Noach is described as “a man of the earth”. Moshe, on the other hand, is first described as “an Egyptian man” but at the end of his life Moshe is described as “man of God”. How do we understand the vastly different trajectories of these two important Biblical characters?

The Meshech Chochma suggests that the difference can be explained based on the different focus of each man. Noach’s focus was entirely internal. He saved his immediate family and he personally may have started as a tsaddik, but he had no impact on others. Moshe, on the other hand, started his life not even knowing that he was Jewish. However during the last 40 years of his life he dedicated himself completely to the physical and spiritual well-being of the Jewish People. The Meshech Chochma’s lesson is that the best way to guarantee our own spiritual growth is by caring for others and sharing with others.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l taught that the downward trajectory of Noach’s spiritual status is due to the lack of any opposition post-flood. In the years leading up to the flood, Noach had a clear goal: to avoid falling into the depravity and sinfulness of the rest of society. He had something to fight against and he did so with great courage and conviction. However, after the flood, there was nothing to fight against. All of the sinners had perished. Now Noach had to stop fighting against something and figure out what he wanted to fight for. Instead of playing defense Noach needed to set an affirmative, proactive agenda of meaning and purpose. This can be much more difficult, and Noach couldn’t find his way in a world without a clear villain.

As we emerge (with God’s help) from the pandemic, both of these lessons are important to consider. First, during CoVID for many of us our major goal seemed like self-preservation. It’s very difficult to focus on others when we feel our very lives and those of our family are in peril. As we emerge from this modern day Mabul, and the health threat has dramatically decreased for those who are vaccinated, we must remind ourselves of the importance of caring for and thinking of others. This is important not only for the sake of the other and for the sake of society, but as we see from our Parsha, caring for others is important for our own self-actualization. Moshe’s model teaches us that we grow as people and become more Godly the more we think about others and extend ourselves.

Second, for 18 months we have been fighting against the realities that were created due to the pandemic. We fought to survive. We fought to maintain a sense of normalcy. We fought to keep our sanity. We fought for CoVID protocols. We fought against CoVID protocols. Whatever the case may have been, we were not setting the agenda. We were forced to play the hand that God dealt us. We were reacting and responding to situations that felt out of our control. In many ways that phase of the pandemic is ending/ has ended. We now have a chance to set our own agenda. To act in an affirmative and proactive way. To initiate, not just respond. While it sounds marvelous and exciting and hopeful, it can also be overwhelming and paralyzing and difficult.

Let us learn from Moshe’s trajectory and be ready to set our own agenda. Let us make sure to include others, and causes bigger than ourselves, in that agenda. By doing so we can look forward to an upward trajectory of religious growth.