



The Parsha in Practice

My Facebook Hiatus

The great debate relating to Noach's character has yet to be resolved. He was, as the pasuk reminds us, an "אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדוֹרֹתָיו", a righteous man; he was blameless in his generations..." but at the same time, the well-known qualifier, the words "in his generations" seems to throw some shade on his accomplishments, perhaps rendering them as impressive only in his generation, but not so in the generation of Avraham, where his accomplishments would have been of little note.

I don't want to enter into this debate other than to point out that according to both opinions, Noach qualitatively surpassed the behavior of his own generation. Whether he would have done better or worse in another generation? Who knows? But even if only to rise over the corruption of his doomed environment should be seen as impressive.

I think a lot about my generation. I am too young to be a Baby Boomer and am right between Generation X and Y. As most of you reading this, I grew up in a world without the ubiquity of computers, the internet, or cell phones and only as an adult was introduced to these advances. Blessedly, unlike our children to whom these features were fait accompli, I was able to observe the effect - better and worse - they had on me as I adopted them, in real time.

One of the small features of our new generation was highlighted in an article on Medium written by our own Max Kane. How many kvetchers does it take to create a backlash? Max tracked the brouhaha that surrounded Israeli actress Gal Gadot after she was chosen to play Cleopatra in a new film. I'll leave the details to Max, but his well-argued point was to illustrate the importance of gatekeepers in media. The universal access and the democratization of opinion on social media - where Anyone who says Anything is treated as if they are Someone has said Everything - turns just about every minority opinion into a major "backlash," and makes it very difficult to sort and reflect on information objectively.

Another new feature? "Doomscrolling." This is a new expression of the phenomenon of scrolling through your social media feed from one bad news post, doomsday meme, or electoral Armageddon prediction to another. I thank Rabbi Philip Moskowitz for bringing this phrase to my attention in a wonderful Facebook post that was an exception to the doomsday rule.

These new generational features have been on my mind as I've been reading a book called "Deep Work" by Cal Newport which is about what he refers to as the "Super-Power" of being able to focus on important work that needs to be done without distraction. The book contains a decent amount of cultural criticism and practical tips for creating spaces in our lives for this kind of "Deep Work." He makes a compelling argument that while the benefits of social media, namely the sense of community, conversation, and the ability to keep up with people is certainly palpable, might we be overstating these benefits without recognizing the downsides. Yes, social media is another way to find "community," but is it our wisest? Algorithmic impressiveness notwithstanding, am I really made happier by the posts that present themselves to me? For sure, occasionally, but at what cost? How much of the negativity of small-time "kvetchers" am I going to allow to "backlash" in my mind?

The Gemara in Sanhedrin (108b) teaches that the people of his generation referred to Noach as a "Zaken," an "old man." While it is true that he was many hundreds of years old, for that era, he was barely up to a mid-life crisis. Why did they refer to him as an "old man?" The Ozneyim l'Torah explains that to the people of his wicked generation, Noach had not adapted to the "new age." He was an old-timer with old values. Perhaps this is Noach's secret. He didn't actually surpass his generation, he just never descended with it.

There are probably a lot of really positive uses for social media for a rabbi. I can share a pithy observation (if I could only think of them) or provoke engaging conversation (which might or might not eventually descend into name-calling). I could share shiurim, classes, or interesting articles with the hundreds of people who are my "friends" (a.k.a. - people with whom I crossed paths in deep and shallow ways over the years) and perhaps one day I will do all of those things. But for now, I do not. I tend to just scroll, get annoyed, wish the occasional happy birthday, feel shock about the drastic differences that my friends have in their views (If they only knew I was friends with them both!), watch amazing baseball clips and get stuck on "how it's made" videos (I do love those).

What do I lose? I feel like I lose control. Control of time, of choice, and of content. I lose the ability to curate my experiences and instead find myself outsourcing to an algorithm that is likely more interested in getting me to hang on than to hang up (remember when that phrase made sense?).

Our generation is moving quickly and has a lot it still needs to figure out. Social media is obviously not our only challenge, but it's the one that takes the most of my time. I'm taking a break. I'll let you know how it goes.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach