

Parashat Noach 5770, 2009:

The Silence of a Man

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra *alehah hashalom* and to the *refuah shalaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Shmuel Yosef ben Miriam, and HaRav Shimon ben Chaya.

“...Noah was a righteous man he was perfect in his generations; Noah walked with G-d.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 5:9, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, known as the Ramban, (1194-1270), following Reish Lakish’s opinion in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 108a, explains why Noah found favor in Hashem’s eyes in the following fashion:

The reason why Noah found favor in the eyes of Hashem is because all of his actions before Him were pleasant and pleasing. So, too, do we find [in the case of Moshe where it states:] “And the L-rd said to Moses: ‘Even this thing that you have spoken, I will do, for you have found favor in My eyes, and I have known you by name.’” (*Sefer Shemot* 33:17) [Noach, therefore, was similar to Yosef] about whom the Torah states: “The L-rd was with Joseph, and He extended charisma to him, and He gave him favor in the eyes of the warden of the prison.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 39:21) [In addition, Noach was similar to Esther] about whom it states: “...and Esther obtained grace in the eyes of all who beheld her.” (*Megilat Ester* 2:15). Noach having found “favor in the eyes of the L-rd” is mentioned in contrast to the actions of his generation since all of their actions caused despondency before Him, may He be blessed. [In contrast,] it says regarding him [Noach] that his actions were favorable to Him. Afterwards, [the Torah states explicitly] why he [Noach] was considered good before Him, i.e., he was a completely righteous individual [see *Sefer Bereishit* 5:9]. (Translation my own.)

Beyond question, Noach emerges within the Ramban’s purview as someone of comparable status to Moshe, Yosef, and Esther. Like those to whom he is compared, he was unquestionably great – a true hero of the spirit, and a model for us all. In a word, it appears that Noach was the embodiment of human perfection and righteousness.

The Talmudic Sages Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Chanina, however, had an entirely different perception of Noach's persona:

“These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man, and perfect in his generations.” R. Johanan said: In his generations, but not in other generations...R. Hanina said: As an illustration of R. Johanan's view, to what may this be compared? To a barrel of wine lying in a vault of acid: in its place, its odor is fragrant [by comparison with the acid]; elsewhere, its odor will not be fragrant. (*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 108a*, translation, *Soncino Talmud*.)

For Rabbi Yochanan, Noach was nothing special at all. Moreover, he was only righteous in comparison to the perverse men of his time. As Rabbi Chanina notes, he was only relatively good, but not intrinsically or inherently “perfect.” He was, if you will, merely a *tzaddik* (righteous individual) by default, and no one of any true value.

Why did Rabbi Yochanan adopt this view of Noach? What factor or factors may have contributed to this overwhelmingly negative perception? I believe the answer may be readily found in the following passage:

And G-d said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth has become full of robbery because of them, and behold I am destroying them from the earth...And I, behold I am bringing the flood, water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which there is the spirit of life, from beneath the heavens; all that is upon the earth will perish. And I will set up My covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you and your sons, and your wife and your sons' wives with you...And Noah did; according to all that G-d had commanded him, so he did. (*Sefer Bereishit 6:13, 17-18. 22*)

G-d proclaimed to Noach that He was about to destroy “all flesh in which there is the spirit of life, from beneath the heavens.” The only human survivors would be Noach and his family: “And I will set up My covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you and your sons, and your wife and your sons’ wives with you...” What was Noach’s response to the imminent destruction of all of mankind? “And Noah did; according to all that G-d had commanded him, so he did...”

Noach's silence was deafening! His acquiescence to the impending destruction of mankind is almost unfathomable. His failure to protest the chaos and catastrophe to come seems to be a "rubber stamp" of approval, in line with the Talmudic dictum: "*Shetikah k'hodaah*" ("Silence gives consent," *Talmud Bavli, Bab Metziah 37b*). Little wonder, indeed, that Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Chanina saw him as merely "perfect in his generations," and close to a nondescript individual were he to have lived at any other time.

In stark contrast, *Avraham Avinu* (our Father Abraham) taught mankind what one ought to do when faced by injustice – even when that act of injustice was about to be performed by G-d, Himself:

And the L-rd said, "Since the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great, and since their sin has become very grave, I will descend now and see, whether according to her cry, which has come to Me, they have done; [I will wreak] destruction [upon them]; and if not, I will know." And the men turned from there and went to Sodom, and Abraham was still standing before the L-rd. (*Sefer Bereishit 18:20-22*)

It is at this point, and for the first time in the annals of human history, an individual in the personage of Abraham encountered G-d in a challenging manner. His advocacy on behalf of the decadent and profligate inhabitants of S'dom speaks volumes regarding the nature and universal quality of justice (*mishpat*). In Avraham's and Judaism's view, even G-d must uphold the standards of justice that He has established for mankind. Thus, upon becoming aware of Hashem's forthcoming plan to destroy S'dom, Avraham bravely and unhesitatingly responded with these history-changing words:

And Abraham approached and said, "Will You even destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city; will You even destroy and not forgive the place for the sake of the fifty righteous men who are in its midst? Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the

wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?"(*Sefer Bereishit* 18:23-25, underlining my own)

Herein we find a fundamental shift in the dialogical encounter between man and G-d. As of this point in time, man ceased to be a passive partner, a mere subordinate in the I-Thou relationship. Instead, Avraham approached G-d, in fear and trembling to be sure, yet certain, nevertheless, that his plea on behalf of S'dom would be heard. He understood, like no one before him, that both man and his Creator are subject to the same G-d-given metaphysical elements of justice. In a word, by encountering the Almighty in such a fashion, Avraham did precisely what Noach should have done.

Shlomo Hamelech (King Solomon) was the wisest man in history. In the third chapter of his masterful examination of the human spirit known as *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), he taught us a lesson that is particularly apropos in comparing Noach's and Avraham's actions: "Everything has an appointed season, and there is a time for every matter under the heaven... a time to be silent and a time to speak." (Verses 1 and 7) Avraham knew when it was time to speak and to advocate on behalf of the morally depraved inhabitants of S'dom; Noach failed to rise to the occasion when he could and should have spoken on behalf of all of mankind. It is precisely this silence, I believe, that caused his star to be eclipsed forevermore by the brilliant light of Avraham's sun.

On some level, at least, our challenge in this world is to decide whether we will follow in the footsteps of Noach or Avraham. Will we acquiesce to evil or bravely stand up to and oppose it? Will we allow our silence to give consent or will we be willing to stand up for what is ultimately correct according to Hashem's Torah? Let us hope and pray that each

of us will follow Avraham's course. May *Hashem* give us the strength and wisdom to walk upon this world-transforming and world-building path. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

Do you have questions, comments, ideas, or thoughts about this drasha? Would you like to share them? My blog is located at: tefilahandtorah.blogspot.com.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to over 300 people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: rdbe718@gmail.com.