

Parashat Noach 5773, 2012:

Walking With Hashem, or Before Hashem?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Who was Noach and who was Avraham? This simple question is crucial in helping us analyze the nature of genuine *tzidkut* (righteousness) and inauthentic *tzidkut*. Noach is described in *Sefer Bereishit* 6:9 as: “...*et HaElokim hithalech Noach*” (“Noach walked with G-d”). In contrast, regarding Avraham, the text (*ibid.* , 17:1) states: “...*hithalach Ifani v’heyah tamim*” (“...walk before me and be complete,” Rashi, 1040-1105). The *Midrash Rabah* to *Sefer Bereishit* (middle of the fifth century CE) notes this intriguing disparity in language. In 30:10, Rabbi Yehudah explains this difference in allegorical terms:

“This may be compared to a nobleman who has two sons, one who is grown and one who is young. He says to the youngster: “Walk with me,” whereas he says to the grown son: “Come and walk before me.” So, too, was it the case regarding Avraham whose [spiritual] strength was great and thus Hashem said: “Walk before Me.” In contrast, Noach who was [spiritually] weak, was merely described as “...*et HaElokim hithalech Noach*.” (“...and Noach walked with G-d.”)

Rashi summarizes this Midrash in his commentary to *Sefer Bereishit* 6:9. He adds that Noach needed to be supported by Hashem (“*tzarich saad l’tamcho*”), whereas Avraham grew stronger and stronger on his own (“*hayah mitchazak u’mehalach b’tzidko m’aluv*”). Indeed, as Avraham continued to grow spiritually through each of the ten trials presented to him by Hashem, he also grew in the recognition of his responsibilities toward his fellow man. Thus, Avraham, in awe and with dignity, beseeched Hashem for mercy on

behalf of the men, women, and children of S'dom. He cared deeply about others, and became the master of the special and holy *midah* (moral quality) of *chesed*. He truly walked before Hashem, as he forged new paths of spiritual response to the crises and trials with which he was presented.

Noach was an entirely different story. He was, as the Yiddish statement goes, a *tzadik im peltz* (someone who was wrapped in furs while those around him remained cold). When Hashem told him that he was about to destroy the entire world by the impending Great Flood, we never see Noach entreat Hashem on behalf of the populace of the world. He remained silent and seemingly uncaring regarding the fate of his fellow man. In stark contrast to Avraham, therefore, Noach appears to be spiritually immature. He could only follow alongside of Hashem when He was metaphorically leading him directly by the hand. He did not, because he could not, respond in a morally creative manner to the pressing requirements of his time, even when they encompassed the needs of the entire world. How different, indeed, was Avraham, the “steward of mankind,” whose watchword was clearly: “What about them?” This means he boldly and unhesitatingly asked the question: “What about those in the world who need Divine mercy and protection, and need an advocate to bring this to G-d’s attention?”

On some level, at least, our challenge in this world is to decide whether we will follow in the footsteps of Noach, or those of Avraham. One thing is clear: Only when we honestly recognize our obligations to mankind in general, in conjunction with our singular responsibilities to all Jews everywhere, can we claim the title of being “*bnei Avraham*” (the children of Avraham).

Let us hope and pray that each of us will follow Avraham's path. Then, we will be able to be active participants in bringing *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the Righteous Redeemer). May *Hashem* give us the strength and wisdom to be part of this glorious world-building process. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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