

Parashat Noach 5778, 2017:

The Terah We Never Knew

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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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Chaya Mindel bat Leah Basha, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

We encounter the following *pasuk* (verse) toward the end of our *parasha*, “These are the generations of Terah, Terah was the father of Abraham, Nahor and Haran...” (*Sefer Bereishit* 11:27) If you were to ask most people to identify Terah, they would probably tell you that he was Abraham’s father and an idol worshipper. This idea is based upon a well-known verse that was popularized by its inclusion in the Passover Haggadah: “And Joshua said to the entire nation, ‘Thus said the L-rd G-d of Israel, your fathers dwelt on the other side of the river from earliest time, Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor; and they served other gods.” (*Sefer Yehoshua* 24:2, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Many Midrashic passages portray Terah as a highly successful idol manufacturer and one of the great business leaders in Nimrod’s realm. Moreover, Terah’s very name meets with almost universal revulsion based upon the following well-known Midrashic passage in which he voluntarily placed Abraham into Nimrod’s control:

He (Terah) took him (Abraham) and gave him over to Nimrod. (Nimrod) said to him: “Let us worship the fire!” (Abraham) said to him: “Should we not then worship water, which extinguishes fire!” (Nimrod) said to him: “Then, let us worship the water!” (Abraham) said to him: “Should we not then worship the clouds, which carry the water?” (Nimrod) said to him: “Then, let us worship the cloud!” (Abraham) said to him: “If so, should we not then worship the wind, which scatters the clouds?” (Nimrod) said to him: “Then, let us worship the wind!” (Abraham) said to him: “Should we not then worship the human, who withstands the wind?” (Nimrod) said to him: “You are merely piling words; we should bow to none other than the fire. I shall therefore cast you in it, and let your

G-d to whom you bow come and save you from it!" (*Bereishit Rabbah* 38:11, ed. Theodor-Albeck, 363-364, translation, <http://thetorah.com/why-the-midrash-has-abraham-thrown-into-nimrods-furnace/>)

In short, from a Jewish perspective, there seems to be little reason to look upon Terah with anything other than total disdain, since his essential values were antithetical to everything Abraham taught the world, namely, dedication to the one true G-d and the singular import of *gemilut chasadim* (loving-kindness).

When we broaden our scope of vision, however, a very different Terah emerges that belies the standard understanding of who we think he was:

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: "Anyone whose name is mentioned twice in succession in the Tanach is destined to be part of the two worlds [i.e. this world and the world to come]. [As it states,] 'Noah, Noah,' 'Abraham, Abraham,' 'Jacob, Jacob,' (*Sefer Bereishit* 7:9, 22:12, 46:2), 'Moses, Moses' (*Sefer Shemot* 3:4), 'Samuel, Samuel' (*Sefer Shmuel* I:3:6), 'Peretz, Peretz' (*Megillat Rut* 6:18)." His fellow sages said to him: "Behold [your position must be incorrect, for] does it not say, 'These are the generations of Terah, Terah was the father of Abraham, Nahor and Haran...' [And we know, of course, that Terah was an inveterate idol worshipper]!"

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana responded to them: "Yes, even he has a portion in the two worlds, for is it not the case that our father, Abraham, was not gathered unto his forefathers until it was made known to him that his father Terah had done *teshuvah*? As the verse states, 'And you [Abraham] shall go unto your forefathers in peace...' " (*Sefer Bereishit* 15:15, *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Sefer Shemot*, end of section 18, translation my own)

Rashi (1040-1105) briefly alludes to this *Midrash* when he states, "His [Abraham's] father worshipped idols and G-d declared to him that he would go unto him [Terah]! Perforce this means that Terah did *teshuvah*." (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Bereishit* 15:15, s.v. "*el avotecha*")

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, explicates Rashi's gloss in the following manner:

When a father's antipathy [, as depicted in our earlier *Midrash*,] toward a son reaches the level of enmity, it is often psychopathological. While enmity toward a stranger is not always a sign of a sick mind or mental aberration, this kind of hostility between father and son is due to a "sick soul" and a personality permeated with hatred... *Hazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) therefore tell us the story of Terah's hostility towards Abram, for he saw his destroying everything that he, Terah, had worked to accomplish. Then, suddenly, we hear that Terah repented. (This, and the following

quotations of the Rav, are from, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*,” Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, pages 16-17, brackets my own)

At this point, we may well join the Rav in asking, “What motivated Terah to abandon the luxury of his origins and become a wanderer [at the end of our *parasha*] ...?” We are fortunate that he provides us with a powerful response:

The answer is *hirhurei teshuvah* – stirrings of repentance. Here the patron of the idolaters, a well-known manufacturer of idols, revered and respected by everyone, suddenly abandons everything. Apparently, he realized that all he stood for was absurd and that his son Abram was correct, and Abrams’s ideas reflected the divine truth. He then reappears as a *baal teshuvah*, one who has repented, and is responsible for the move [at the end of our *parasha*] to Haran, towards *Eretz Yisrael*, to begin his life anew.

The Rav’s words are quite reminiscent of a passage that appears in the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* regarding a late-in-life *baal teshuvah*:

Even if he transgressed throughout his entire life and repented on the day of his death and died in repentance, all his sins are forgiven as [*Sefer Kohelet*, 12:2] continues: “Before the sun, the light, the moon, or the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain...” - This refers to the day of death. Thus, we can infer that if one remembers his Creator and repents before he dies, he is forgiven. (*Hilchot Teshuvah* II:1, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

Terah’s transformation from idol worshipper to *baal teshuvah* is a powerful message to us all. This teaches us that no matter how far away we may be from the Holy One blessed be He, we may nevertheless return to His welcoming arms and overflowing mercy. With Hashem’s help, may we learn from Terah’s example and ever strive to be better tomorrow than we are today. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of 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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at:
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*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.