

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Noach

Noach and His Generations

אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו

These are the offspring of Noach, Noach was a righteous man, complete in his generations. (6:9)

Some questions regarding this pasuk:

- What does the phrase “in his generations” add and why is it in the plural?
- What is the meaning of the two terms “צדיק – righteous” and “תמים – complete”?
- Later on in the Parsha,¹ Hashem says to Noach, “כִּי אֶתְּךָ רָאִיתִי צַדִּיק לְפָנַי” – for it is you that I have seen to be righteous before Me in this generation.” Why does Hashem there not mention the word “תמים” as our pasuk did?

The Gemara² explains that the two words “צדיק תמים” refer to two different positive aspects of Noach:

צדיק: במעשיו – *a righteous man: in his deeds*

תמים: בדרכיו – *a complete man: in his ways.*

Rashi explains that the first term refers to Noach’s righteousness in being free of the sins of violence which typified his time, while the latter term – “complete” – refers to Noach’s trait of humility.

The Meshech Chochmah notes that each of these aspects was of particular significance for a different “generation” in Noach’s life. The first generation was that of the flood. At that time, Noach’s primary distinction was that of “*tzaddik*,” one who was careful with his deeds. Although the world around him was filled with violence and promiscuity, Noach nevertheless maintained a lifestyle which

¹ 7:1.

² Avodah Zarah 6a.

was free of such wrongdoings. In the face of the climate of permissiveness which prevailed, Noach's circumspection and righteous behavior were indeed cause for praise. His trait of humility, on the other hand, was of less significance in that generation. The true test of humility is for a person to remain humble even as others accord him honor and acclaim. The generation of the flood did not see Noach's behavior as warranting honor, only scorn and derision. Under such circumstances, Noach's trait of humility did not express itself in any significant way.

The generation following the flood saw the reverse of the above. Having learned their lesson from the flood, this generation was careful regarding matters of violence and promiscuity.³ As such, Noach's behavioral standards, represented by the term "*tzaddik*," were less cause for distinction. By contrast, his trait of humility was now highlighted, for it was known to all that he alone had been saved from the flood together with his family and that he had been instrumental in preserving every form of life in the world. To remain humble in the face of such recognition and acclaim was truly an achievement.

Therefore, our opening pasuk states that Noach was "a *tzaddik* and *tamim* in his generations" – i.e. before and after the flood – with each trait applying to one of those two generations. In this way, this pasuk serves as a general introduction for the entire parsha, the details of which it then then proceeds to describe. Accordingly, we can now understand why, upon telling Noach to enter the ark, Hashem only mentions the distinction which was of significance at that time: "For it is you that I have seen as a *tzaddik* before Me in this generation."

The Year of the Flood

כָּל רוֹמֵשׁ עַל הָאָרֶץ לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתֵיהֶם יֵצְאוּ מִן הַתֵּיבָה

Everything that moves on earth, came out of the Ark by their families. (8:19)

³ See Rashi to 8:19, s.v. *le'mishpechoseihem*.

Commenting on the word “למשפחותיהם – by their families,” the Gemara⁴ quotes R’ Yochanan as saying: “ולא הם – and not them.”

Commentators over the generations have been most perplexed by R’ Yochanan’s words. How can the animals have emerged from the Ark “by their families” if they, themselves, did not emerge?

The Meshech Chochmah prefaces his explanation of R’ Yochanan’s comment by posing a basic question. As we know, Noach was in the Ark together with the animals and birds etc. for twelve months. Why was it necessary to be in there for so long? After all, the entire process of the flood was completely supernatural; likewise, the survival of all those in the Ark under the oppressive conditions of the flood was a miracle. As such, could the miracle not have taken the form of Divine retribution wiping out all perpetrators of evil in an instant? Why take a year over something which only needed a moment?

The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is that flood was not only about meting out punishment for those who were to be destroyed, it was about restoring the nature of those who survived to its original state. The pasuk describes the situation prior to the flood with the words,⁵ “כִּי הִשְׁחִית כָּל בְּשָׂר אֶת דְּרָכָו עַל הָאָרֶץ – for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth.” There was a natural tendency among all forms of life – both human and animal – toward violence and corruption, with inter-mating between species a commonplace occurrence. As such, it was not enough for a certain number of people, animals and beasts etc. to be spared from destruction, they needed to be restored to their prior nature. For if they stayed on their current path with its tendency toward corruption, then they would survive simply to perpetuate it, leading the world back to the state which demanded retribution in the first place!

Retribution can take place in an instant. *Education* takes longer. A meaningful and enduring change in nature can only take place at a natural rate. The year of the flood was one of fundamental re-orientation for all creatures. For this purpose, physical relations were suspended for both humans and animals; the animals themselves became more domesticated, receiving their food from man [while man, for his part, spent the year dedicated to caring for others, thereby uprooting

⁴ Sanhedrin 108b.

⁵ 6:12.

the selfish tendencies which nurtured violence]. The result of this year-long program of “*chinuch*” was that by the time everyone emerged from the Ark, it was “למשפחותיהם,” which the Gemara explains to mean “for their families,” i.e. with a commitment to remain faithful to their species (for animals) and spouses (for humans). Indeed, the Midrash⁶ informs us that even generations later, people were careful in matters of physical morality as a result of the flood.⁷

This is the background to R’ Yochanan’s comment: “ולא הם – and not them.” The meaning of this statement is that if one were to see these creatures prior to entering the Ark and then see them again when they left, he would be convinced that these were *different creatures* – to the point where he would exclaim “these are not them!” – so fundamental was the change in their nature. This dramatic transformation was what had taken place over the course of the twelve months in the Ark.

This week’s Divrei Torah are dedicated *le’ilui nishmas*

Irene Brown

יהודית בת חיים ע"ה

⁶ See Bereishis Rabbah 70:12.

⁷ [i.e., whereas one might have understood that people’s circumspection in this area was as a result of the fear generated by the punishment of those who *died* in the flood, the Meshech Chochmah explains that it was the product of the experiences of those who *survived it* in the Ark.]