

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Noach)

There is a story they tell about the “Chazon-Ish” (Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, 1878-1953).

Towards the end of his life, when he was already quite weak, the phone rang in his home on a Friday afternoon. One of the Chazon-Ish’s students, who was helping in the house answered the call and responded to a fellow on the other end who had a daughter who was quite ill. The man, who was a cab driver, had a six-year-old daughter who had fallen ill with leukemia, and someone had told him about the Chazon-Ish and the legendary reputation his blessings had received.

He was desperate for help and wanted to come to the Chazon-Ish for a blessing before Shabbat.

The student explained that the Chazon-Ish was not well and could not possibly see him in the next few hours, but the fellow should call back after Shabbat. The cab driver, however, would not let the student off the phone, begging for even a moment of the Chazon-Ish’s time.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed the phone from the startled student’s hand and the Chazon-Ish himself got on the phone.

“Please come right over, and I will be happy to see you.” Said the Chazon-Ish, after which he explained to the student that one should never be too tired to hear the pain of a fellow human being.

When the cab driver arrived, the Chazon-Ish himself answered the door and ushered the fellow in to sit down.

After hearing the story of his daughter, dying of cancer at the age of six, the Chazon-Ish explained that only G-d heals the sick, but that if this cab driver believed that his prayers could help, he would certainly consider it an honor and a privilege to pray for his daughter.

As the cab driver was leaving the home, he looked back to see the Chazon-Ish sobbing hysterically in the corner of the living room, with tears streaming down his face.

The cab driver felt terrible, finally realizing why the student had wanted to put off his visit till after Shabbat. He assumed the Chazon-Ish himself must have had a loss in his family, perhaps of a child, and perhaps even to Leukemia, and that his conversation had triggered the memories that were obviously causing the great rabbi such pain and heartache.

Curious as to the story behind the Chazon-Ish’s reaction, he enquired of one of the students as to what was causing the Chazon-Ish so much pain.

The student responded with a puzzled expression:

“I don’t understand; aren’t you the fellow whose daughter is very ill, and didn’t you just ask the Rav for a blessing?”

*“Well, yes”, responded the cab driver,
“But I didn’t realize I would be bringing up such terrible memories for the Rabbi, why is he so broken up?”*

The student explained: “You don’t understand. You asked the Rabbi to pray for your daughter, and that is what he is doing. But with the Chazon Ish, it’s not your daughter he is praying for, it’s his own. Because for such a great rabbi, your daughter is his daughter.”

What does it mean to be a *Tzaddik*, a truly righteous person?

In the entire Torah, there is only one person who is ever described as a *Tzaddik*, and that is Noach, who is called an “Ish *Tzaddik*”, a righteous man, at the beginning of this week’s portion, appropriately named *Noach*.

*“...Noach Ish Tzaddik, Tamim Hayah’ Be’Dorotav, Et HaElokim Hit’halech Noach.”
“... Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generations, Noach walked with G-d.” (Genesis 6:9)*

What was so special about Noach that caused the Torah to describe him as a *Tzaddik*? You can’t ask for a better introduction than Noach’s: righteous, perfect, the consummate *Tzaddik* who walked with G-d; this would seem to be the ideal of what a person is meant to be, which leaves us wondering what we are missing. After all, we do not trace our Jewish lineage back to Noach, but rather back to Avraham. It is Avraham who is traditionally described as the first Jew, not Noach. Yet Avraham is never described in the Torah as a *Tzaddik*; why not? And where did Noach, the only *Tzaddik* in the Torah go wrong?

Rashi (1040-1105), perhaps sensing this question, quotes the Midrash which itself is challenged by what we are to make of who Noach really was:

The verse (6:9) tells us that Noach was perfect *in his generations*, and there are some rabbis, explains Rashi, who interpret this in Noach’s favor, suggesting that if in his wicked generation, he was considered to be a *Tzaddik*; he would certainly have been even more righteous in a generation of generally righteous people. Some rabbis, however, interpret the afore-mentioned comment as casting a much more negative light on Noach, interpreting it to mean that Noach may have been considered righteous relative to his particularly wicked generation, but “*had he lived in the time of Abraham, he would not have been considered anything (special).*”

This comment is surprising to say the least: Noach would have been “*klum*”, *nothing*, in Abraham’s generation? How could the commentaries suggest that the only person ever defined in the Torah as a *Tzaddik* would have been nothing? Does this mean that being a *Tzaddik* is a relative idea?

It is interesting to note that Rashi, in his comments actually describes Avraham in his generation as a *Tzaddik*, though the verses in the Torah do not apply this to Avraham at all. Further, the Midrash

compares Noach in his own generation, with Noach in Avraham's generation; why not just compare a wicked generation to a more righteous generation? Why does Jewish tradition specifically compare Noach to Avraham?

Perhaps the Midrash (and Rashi in quoting it) is alluding to our initial question: why indeed, was Avraham the first Jew, and not Noach?

It is worth noting, that this is not the only comparison we find between Noach and Avraham; Rashi notes, on the phrase:

“... **Tamim** Hayah' Be'Dorotav, Et HaElokim **Hit'halech** Noach.”
“... **Perfect** in his generations, Noach **walked** with G-d.” (Genesis 6:9)

That the same terminology is employed to describe Avraham, with a slight variation:

“**Hit'halech Lefanai** Ve'Heyeh **Tamim.**”
“**Walk before me, and be perfect.**” (Genesis 17: 1)

Avraham, explains Rashi, walked **before** G-d, while Noach walked **with** G-d. Further, Noach **was** perfect, while Abraham was meant to **become** perfect. What does this difference mean, and how does it relate to our question?

There is one more debate Rashi shares with us, which may serve to elucidate the meaning of this entire question:

When Hashem tells Noach to build an Ark, one of the details of the construction (6:16) is the command to include a *Tsohar*, but the verse does not explain what this *Tsohar* actually is.

Rashi, again quoting the Midrash, explains that there are two opinions as to the nature of this *Tsohar*: some explain it to be a window, and some suggest it was a precious stone which provided internal light. (Some form of a chandelier, perhaps.)

What exactly are these two opinions debating, in trying to understand the nature of this source of light? And more, why did Hashem expressly command Noach to include this in the Ark's construction? Wouldn't it be obvious that Noach would include a source of light in the ark?

I once heard a wonderful explanation for this verse from my teacher, **Rabbi Shlomo Tzvi Ha'Kohen Riskin**. The obvious difference between a window and a chandelier is whether the light comes from within, or from outside the Ark, and, more significantly, that a window allows the people inside the ark to see what is happening outside, whereas the chandelier leaves them focused entirely on their own small world inside the Ark.

Perhaps this was the underlying message G-d was giving Noach; perhaps Noach did not earn the right to see outside the Ark, because Noach's focus was less on the world that was, and more on the world of Noach as it was meant to be.

A careful look at the process whereby Noach was commanded to build the Ark shows that this project took Noach and his family a hundred years! For a hundred years, Noach was out in the front yard hammering away, collecting lumber, while all his neighbors watched the goings-on. One wonders what went through the minds of the homeowner's association as Noach rolled up one day with twin elephants in tow!

And yet, when the time came for Noach and his family to enter the Ark and batten down the hatches, they got in alone. Not one person in the entire world elects to join Noach on his journey. This, perhaps, is Noach's greatest failing.

In fact, once the flood is over, Noach is never called a *Tzaddik* again. Hashem tells Noach one last time, as he is about to enter the Ark, that:

“Bo' Atah' Ve'kol Beitechah' El Ha'Teivah', Ki Otchah' Ra'iti Tzaddik Le'Fanai' Ba'dor Ha'Zeh'.”

*“Come, you and your whole family into the ark, for it is you that I have seen to be **righteous before me** in this generation.” (7:2)*

Again, Noach is described as righteous in his particular generation, almost implying that when this generation ends (momentarily, with the coming of the flood), so does his righteousness.

Noach would have a year in the Ark to contemplate how he had allowed an entire world to be destroyed, while spending a lifetime building an Ark for himself and his family.

Contrast that with Avraham, who, when commanded by G-d to go on his own journey, (in next week's portion, *Lech Lecha'*) which must have seemed similarly inexplicable to those around him, takes with him not only his family, but as well:

“Kol Ha'Nefesh Asher Asu'' Be'Charan”

“All the souls (people) they had made (he and Sarah) in Charan.” (12:5)

And Rashi quotes the Midrash, which explains that these were the people Abraham and Sarah converted to Judaism, who were led out of the darkness of pagan idolatry to a world of monotheism and ethics. Thus, says the Midrash, it is as though they were 'made' by Abraham (and Sarah).

While Noach is getting into his Ark all alone, Avraham wants the world to come with him on his journey.

By far the best example of this is the story of Sodom, which on a certain level represents the flood story of Abraham.

G-d comes to Avraham and tells him He is about to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. (18:20-19:1)

Recall that these cities have become so wicked that G-d hears the screams of the people suffering under the weight of Sodom's evil (18:20-21).

One would expect Avraham, who is trying to teach the world by example, a model of objective ethics and monotheism to be thrilled at this latest development. At the very least, an “OK, Boss” would do; but instead, Avraham starts to argue with G-d!

Maybe there are fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, suggests Abraham. How can the true judge destroy an entire city, full of human beings, if there is any hope that these righteous people might one day succeed in turning the tide? And, incredibly G-d agrees not to destroy these cities if fifty righteous people can be found! At which point Avraham, seeing he has G-d’s ‘ear’, wants to see if he can push his luck a little further: what if there are forty righteous people? And again G-d acquiesces! At which point we are treated to what essentially amounts to a marketplace haggling over the future of Sodom and Gomorrah: How about thirty? Twenty? Ten?

What is going on here? Especially as the entire discussion is ludicrous: G-d obviously knows whether there are any righteous people in either of these cities, and there clearly are none, so why this entire discussion? Unless, of course, this discussion is not really about Sodom and Gomorrah at all, it is about Avraham.

Interestingly, later, when G-d finally does destroy these cities (19:27-29) Avraham actually wakes up early (which is what the word *Va'Yashkem* there really means) to see the destruction, something which seems very much out of character for this paragon of virtue. Is Avraham excited to see the Sodom show? Is it even appropriate for one to witness the destruction of others, whatever the reason might be?

Perhaps the reason Avraham watches the destruction is because if you are an Avraham, you cannot sleep while even a city like Sodom is being destroyed. One wonders what was going through Avraham’s mind as Sodom is destroyed; there is no joy in his heart, but only a sense of loss and failure. If a Sodom could exist, and if all these people could be destroyed, however right that might be in the given moment, something is nonetheless wrong, and Avraham, on a certain level has failed. Because the world has not yet become what it is meant to be.

And this may be why G-d bothers to tell Avraham that he intends to destroy these cities at all, because this was Avraham’s moment; this was the opportunity for Avraham to change the course of human behavior, and to demonstrate that if one human being is in pain, then we are all in pain.

The difference, ultimately, between Avraham and Noach, is that while Noach gets into the Ark alone, Abraham cannot sleep while Sodom is destroyed, even arguing with G-d to try and save this evil city.

This too is perhaps the meaning of the different descriptions of Abraham and Noach. Noach is seen by G-d as a Tzaddik, because, alone in the world as the only person who relates to one G-d, and thus to an objective ethical morality, Noach has the opportunity to impact an entire world. G-d is not only interested in Noach being righteous (6:9); he wants him to be righteous *before* Him, to walk ahead and make the world better.

Perhaps *Tzidkut* (righteousness) is when someone else’s pain really becomes your pain, to the point where there is no difference. Perhaps this was Avraham’s pain; he was not struggling for someone else’s

city; he was in pain over his own city, because if we are all really meant to be one, then *anyone's* pain should be *everyone's* pain.

Maybe this is the reason Avraham himself is never called a Tzaddik in the Torah; because if you ever think you actually got there, you will never get there.

The life of Avraham was never about Avraham, just like the true Tzaddik has no interest whatsoever in whether he or she is actually a Tzaddik. And ultimately, Avraham is the first Jew, because this is what Judaism is all about.

Perhaps this year, with G-d's help, we can finally learn to truly feel each other's pain and challenges, as well as joys and hopes, so that the world becomes the place Avraham dreamed of so long ago.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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