

In Defense of the Righteous

Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations. And Noah, with his sons... went into the Ark because of the waters of the Flood. (ibid. 6:9; 7:7)

The classical commentators are divided concerning the true nature of Noah's righteousness. The Torah begins by stating that Noah was righteous –i.e., “in his generations.” This leads to a debate among the commentators concerning Noah's status: had he lived in a generation with a person like Avraham he would not have been considered righteous or perhaps even if there would have been other great people in his time he still would have been considered righteous. In short, was Noah a relative *tzaddik* (righteous person), in relation to the wicked of his generation, or could he have passed the litmus test even in Avraham's generation? Next, the Torah tells us that Noah entered the Ark, "because of the waters of the Flood." This implies that our hero waited until the last minute before entering the Ark. Indeed, the Talmud says that Noah was of the lesser believers. On the one hand, he believed that there would be a flood. On the other hand, he did not enter the Ark until the water was up to his mouth. How are we to understand Noah? Was he a reluctant *tzaddik*?

One explanation is given by one of the most unique figures in the Chassidic movement, the Shpoler Zeidy (lit. the grandfather from the town Shpole. He spent most of his time collecting money to get Jews out of prison who had been put into prison for false pretenses. He lived in 19th century Russia, one of the worst periods of anti-Semitism under the Czars.) His exegesis provides a new outlook on what has been a somewhat prejudicial perception of the individual whom the Torah refers to as the "first *tzaddik*." Those who take a dim view of Noah's righteousness are doing the Jewish nation a great service. These commentators understood that just about every *tzaddik* throughout time will be plagued with detractors. Regardless of his piety and even saintliness there will always be someone, somewhere, who will have a pessimistic or prejudiced view of him. They will find something negative to comment about or they will fabricate something to discredit him. Think: is there a more revered person in the Torah than Moses? Nonetheless, they suspected him of inappropriate behavior and wanting to usurp power. It doesn't make sense to discredit such a loyal servant of the people, but it's human nature; it's usually fostered by envy and nurtured by insecurity—and it happens all of the time. If the first *tzaddik* in the Torah (Noah) would have had no detractors, he would have established the defining criteria for determining who is and who is not a *tzaddik*. Thus, these commentators went out of their way to be negative about Noah, in order to teach future generations of *tzaddikim* that those who belittle do not negate the righteousness of the individual. Even Noah had detractors. Yet, the Torah grants him the Almighty's sign of approval with His personal confirmation: "And Noah found favor in the eyes of G-d" (6:8). Can one ask for more?

Concerning Noah's seemingly diminished conviction (If he believed there would be a flood, why didn't he enter the Ark immediately, why did he wait until he was about to drown?). The sages of the Talmud refer to him as being from the lesser believers. Another

Chassidic master, Rav Yitzchak Vorki (1779-1848), explains that Noah waited for the last second to board the Ark because he hoped that the Flood would not come - not because he lacked faith, but because he believed in people. Noah cared about those individuals of little faith, hoping that they would ultimately come around and repent, thus circumventing the need for punishment—the Flood. Noah cared about these people and thought they would rally. Regrettably, they did not, and he was compelled to enter the Ark.

Are we any different? There is an entire world of alienated Jews out there, who have been estranged for generations from the Torah and getting real with their Judaism. Yes, reality indicates that some of these people are too far gone and have been relegated to a sad statistic but, every once in a while there is a success story that is off the charts; like a person who for the first time identifies with being Jewish after the death of a parent. They find something in their Jewishness that they never knew they were looking for. I've seen many such people step up to leadership roles in their city; that's the power of a Jew enthusiastic about his/her Judaism. Each story refreshes our hope for others, renews our passion to reach out to the unaffiliated and rejuvenate our own personal conviction.

A woman once wrote an article in which she questioned her ability to go on praying for the miraculous recovery of a little seven-year-old girl, whom the doctors said had lost her battle with cystic fibrosis. The doctors had sadly issued a death sentence. Yet, no one stopped praying. Why? What about a miracle? Could it be that some of us have difficulty with miracles because we always give up before they occur? Could it be that when G-d challenges our faith, it is precisely at that point of resignation that we blow it. If we would hold on for one more moment, we would experience the salvation.

This is what Noah endured. He did not want to give up - on anyone. This is perhaps one of life's greatest struggles. The ability to cling fast, to hold on, long after reality tells us that it just cannot be. Trusting in G-d when the odds are stacked against us: this is the meaning of enduring faith or faithful endurance - to learn the art of forbearance, to cling tenaciously and persevere with resolution, regardless of the struggles, the odds, the reality. To do this is to understand the meaning of genuine faith. If one believes in G-d, this is logical because nothing is beyond.

(Source: Rabbi Leib Sheinbaum, <http://www.shemayisrael.com/parsha/peninim/archives/noach72.htm>)