

How Strong Is Your Ark?

Reams have been written about the first verse in this week's Torah portion:

These are the offspring of Noah; Noah as a righteous man, perfect in his generation...

Question One: The verse begins with "these are the offspring of Noah," but never tells us who these offspring were. Rather, it merely tells us that Noah was righteous. Who (hint: what) were his offspring? I'll leave you to think about an answer; perhaps it will be addressed next time we review this Torah portion.

Question Two: The above verse seems ambiguous. Was Noah a truly righteous man OR was he righteous ***only in his generation***? The commentary of Rashi (1040-1105) answers that (according to one perspective) if he had lived in the generation of Abraham, he would not have been considered anything of significance. According to this explanation, Noah seems mediocre but compared to the others of his generation he was the best (of that sorry lot). This portrait seems unflattering but there's an approach that gives us a different perspective.

Rav Dovid Kronglass (d. 1973; spiritual guide of Baltimore's Ner Israel Yeshiva) explained Noah's righteousness ***only in his generation*** with a different twist. While it is certainly true that the actual level of commitment and spirituality of Noah was less than Abraham, he still was better off in leadership and spirituality than he would have been if he had lived in Abraham's generation. This seems counterintuitive; one would think that living in the generation of a spiritual paragon like Abraham would be more conducive to becoming a better person. Why would Noah have been less if he had lived in Abraham's generation?

If Noah had been a cohort of Abraham, he would have had little incentive to strive for greatness. If an average person lives next to a great person, it's easy to get lazy and feel that someone else can be the courageous leader. One might say, "when I'm honest with myself, I pale in comparison to him; I'm just a simple layman of limited knowledge and talent."

Noah, however, did not live in the generation of Abraham, he lived in "his generation." In reality, he was greater than he would have been in another generation. This fits in well with a statement from the Ethics of the Sages: "In a place where there are no men, you should strive to be a man."

If you look at the Jewish community in the United States, we're not living in a generation of Abrahams. The Jewish demographic looks so bleak that the Jewish Federations didn't even release the findings of their last Jewish population study. They have conducted major surveys of American Jews over many decades but the last one (in 2000) was mired in controversy over methodology. Last week, statistics were released, but they were from a different source. Here are some excerpts from the NY Times article on it (October 1, 2013):

When the federations decided not to undertake another survey in 2010, Jane Eisner, editor in chief of The Jewish Daily Forward, urged the Pew researchers to jump in. It was a multimillion-dollar effort that was just released last week...the margin of error for the full sample is plus or minus three percentage points.

The intermarriage rate, a bellwether statistic, has reached a high of 58 percent for all Jews, and 71 percent for non-Orthodox Jews — a huge change from before 1970 when only 17 percent of Jews married outside the faith. Two-thirds of Jews do not belong to a synagogue, one-fourth do not believe in God and one-third had a Christmas tree in their home last year.

“It’s a very grim portrait of the health of the American Jewish population in terms of their Jewish identification,” said Jack Wertheimer, a professor of American Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary, in New York.

Ms. Eisner found the results “devastating” because, she said in an interview, “I thought there would be more American Jews who cared about religion.”

“This should serve as a wake-up call for all of us as Jews,” she said, “to think about what kind of community we’re going to be able to sustain if we have so much assimilation.”

Noah tried to warn his generation of the impending flood but no one listened. In our times, there is also a flood that threatens to destroy the Jews but it’s not a flood of water; it’s not even anti-Semitism. Assimilation is the flood that threatens our existence today. We might not have many Abrahams to guide us but let’s at least be Noah and read the writing on the wall—and do something about it. He built an ark; we need to build institutions to protect us from the flood too.

What institution will you help to build? Is it a charity or social service center? A burial society or cemetery? These are wonderful causes and one should give to them, but is there any statistic that shows that they halt or lessen the tide of assimilation? Even synagogues haven’t been successful “arks” in the flood and the evidence is that in the past century, when synagogues were the main institution of identification of American Jewry, little was done to stem the tide. Today, membership among younger Jews is nil and declining.

The Jewish “ark” over the centuries has been Torah study and the Jewish family. When Jews learned Torah, their heritage, it gave the courage and tenacity to remain Jewish. It was true in Greece, Rome, medieval and post renaissance Europe. Even when the walls of the Ghetto came down, the proud Jews were the ones who didn’t assimilate. How does one feel pride in being Jewish? You can’t be proud of something about which you are ignorant. We need more knowledgeable Jews because those Jews will see it as their honor and obligation to raise and instill pride in their family with the Jewish values they have learned.

The most effective Ark is the Jewish home, whose foundation is as strong as the parents who create it. Learning to be excited about being Jewish is foreign to many but passion is the bulwark

of the Ark. Institutions dedicated to building this kind of Ark have been the ones that are the raison d'être of why we're here today.

To insure Jewish continuity we have to ask ourselves two questions:

What kind of Ark will I build? How strong will it be?

Good Shabbos