

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Noach

Noah, the father of modern man and the star of this week's Parsha, is described to us in an unusual way. The story begins, "Noah was a righteous man, innocent (literally, unblemished) in his generation." What does the Torah mean, "in his generation"? Either he was righteous and innocent or he wasn't. Furthermore, who needs introductions? The Torah usually lets people's actions speak for themselves. Abraham, for example, neither gets nor needs any introduction.

Rashi, as usual, quotes the Midrash and, as usual, we have a debate. Some of our sages interpret the phase "in his generation" to be in praise of Noah. How much more righteous would Noah have been, had he lived in a righteous generation! Others interpret it to his discredit. In comparison with the people of his generation he was considered righteous, but had he lived in the generation of Abraham he would have been considered as naught.

So we have two points being made here. First of all, Noah must have been influenced negatively by the evil of his environment and it is certain that he would have been an even greater man had he lived in more virtuous times. Secondly, Noah is defined as righteous and innocent only in comparison with the others of his generation.

Compared to the men of better days he wasn't anything special at all. It turns out that there is no argument as to the degree of Noah's righteousness. Rather, we have two different but perfectly compatible interpretations of the Torah's words. Of course, the same words of Torah can, and often do, make several different points simultaneously.

Let us now return to our other question: Why is the Torah revealing private information about Noah's moral standing? Why would the Torah tell us that Noah was both influenced by his surroundings and compared poorly with others of better days?

Why do we need to know this? Can Noah sue for libel?

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Maybe the Torah wants us to relate. We all know that we have been influenced by our environment. Can any of us claim that Torah, and only Torah, has formed our attitudes, personalities and thought patterns? It is an inescapable fact of life that, to some degree, we have assimilated into our host environment. We are Americans.

But that's O.K. The Midrash says that it is *praise* to say of Noah that he would have been a greater man in a purer environment. It's easy to be holy in a spiritual community. G-d put Noah in that particular generation, because G-d wanted to challenge him. Let's see how you do in a corrupt community. This is the praise of Noah, he was chosen for this most difficult challenge and he passed the test. Noah was righteous in his generation.

When the Bobbover Rebbe arrived in New York after WWII he said that G-d must trust the Jews today more than in the past. In the Shtetl G-d didn't test us the way He tests us today in the U.S.

Unfortunately, we can also relate to Noah in another way. We know that in comparison with the spiritual giants of past generations we don't amount to much. But yet the Torah describes Noah in exactly this way, and G-d chose him to save the world.

In certain sense, we are all little Noahs. Maimonides writes that our attitude should always be that we are in a state of equilibrium. Our very next act will upset the balance. Mitzvah or, G-d forbid, the opposite. But Maimonides goes further. Our attitude should also be that the entire world population is perfectly balanced with equal numbers of Mitzvah and sin. Our next act will upset the balance. The point is that the future state of the world is in our hands. We don't fully appreciate our abilities. We underestimate the significance of our actions.

G-d trusts us so much. Let's live up to the challenge.

Shabbat Shalom!

