

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Noach

People are remembered for what they have accomplished in life far more so than for what they amassed or owned in their lifetime. The size of one's home or type(s) of car(s) one used to drive cannot possibly capture the essence of one's character in the same way that one's actions do. Understandably, eulogies and obituaries of more spiritual people tend to focus on the spiritual accomplishments.

This week's parsha, Noah, tells us of a man who is both remembered, and ultimately rewarded, for his great deeds. It begins with the following biographic words, describing his life and character:

"These are the offspring of Noah; Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with G-d."

Sephorno [born ca. 1480 in Italy] writes that although '*toldot*' is normally translated as 'offspring,' it has an additional level of meaning: "These are his life's *accomplishments*." Rashi elaborates, "The Torah is teaching that the primary 'offspring' of the righteous are their good deeds, for the worthwhile things that a person does are his primary legacy" (Stone Chumash).

The Torah remembers Noah by telling us what he accomplished in his lifetime. He was: "A righteous man, perfect in his generation(s)."

Noah's generation was characterized by immoral sexuality, theft and a general breakdown of mores in society. He lived in a corrupt and decadent civilization. Yet, Noah resisted the influence of his environment. He did not fall prey to peer or societal pressure. Society, family and one's place of origins are factors that can be constraints that threaten people from optimizing their objectives. Noah was a man, who, when challenged, stood up for what was moral and right. He maintained a higher level of existence. For these reasons, G-d communicated with him; and ultimately he was the single individual G-d felt worthwhile to save from the flood.

The famous American comic, W. C. Fields, said, "Remember, a dead fish can float downstream, but it takes a live one to swim upstream." It is much easier to go with the flow. Challenging the status quo, asking fair and hard questions about the way things are, and making changes, takes most people out of their comfort zone. If one lives in a society where the currents of the time promote base and immoral values rather than spiritual ideals, then one must veer off to the side. The strongest part of the current, the middle of the river, is littered with the corpses (spiritually dead) of those who are floating with the current.

In further describing Noah, the Torah tells us, "Noah walked with G-d." Noah swam on the side of the river. He ignored everything around him, so that he could live spiritually. He was not an idolater, nor did he believe in astrology. He did not engage in corruption or sexual immorality; rather, he was a believer in the Creator. He walked with G-d. He did G-d's will.

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Interestingly, there is continuity of the theme of rejecting the status quo in our parsha. The Torah, at the end of our portion, records the birth of Abraham. The Kuzari [R. Yehuda ben Shmuel Ha-Levi, born in Toledo ca. 1070] explains that the son after son genealogy recorded in the Torah (at the end of Parshat Bereishit and at the conclusion of Parshat Noah) is limited to a specific line of paternal lineage. He writes, "These people were the heart and elite of mankind. Each had many children, [but the Torah does not list all of them by name.] Most of the children were like the peel of the fruit, not attaining their father's level, in that they did not possess the same Divine qualities. The Torah therefore only chronicles those people descendants who maintained this Divine quality, who were the minority of the individual's progeny. Adam is ten generations prior to Noah. Abraham is ten generations later."

Noah and Abraham have this specific trait in common. Abraham is famously called *Avraham halvri*. The Sages explain that the word "*Ivri*," is more of a reference to an ideological idea, than it is a geographic location indicating Abraham's birthplace. They explain that "*eiver*" is a reference to the other side, as in the other side of the river. "All the world's inhabitants were on one side of the river whilst Abraham was on the other side. Each one of them was a polytheistic pagan while Abraham believed in the One true G-d." Here too we see that Abraham's principle strength of character is his ability to withstand the societal norms of the day. He questioned. He sought out and explored. He discovered. He accepted. He then acted true to his newly developed system of values by encouraging others to acknowledge the Creator.

Perhaps it is this trait that ennobled Noah so that he was worthy of becoming the father of mankind. Perhaps it is this trait that ennobled Abraham, and made him worthy of becoming the "father of many nations."

Abraham and Noah shared the courage to follow a righteous path that ran counter to their contemporaries. By observation, we noted the common denominators of Noah's and Abraham's life. It seems that the spiritual legacy of doing right is the reward to both figuratively (Abraham) and literally (Noah) become the grandfather of a new world. Our virtues may not give birth literally to a new world or a new people, but they may give rise to a new lease on life to individual people, or organizations.

We remember Noah for his spiritual legacy. We recall him for his spiritual accomplishments. Consider, how would we like to be remembered? What will our spiritual legacy be? Challenging the status quo, asking fair and hard questions about the way things are, and making changes, takes most people out of their comfort zone. But it is exactly there, in moments of discomfort, where people grow the most.

May we all merit living lives in which we stand up for what is just, right and true. May we all have the strength of character so that we fulfill our spiritual potential, thus attaining optimization of our life's purpose. May we follow Noah's example and live lives in which our spiritual offspring is worthy of remembrance.

Shabbat Shalom!

