**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NOACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

When the time came for Noach to enter the ark with his family, God instructed him to board the ark “*ki otekha ra’iti tzadik lefanai ba-dor ha-zeh*” – “because I have seen you as a righteous man in this generation” (7:1). Rashi, citing the Gemara (Eiruvin 18b), famously notes that God’s praise for Noach on this occasion is less effusive than the praise expressed in the opening verse of Parashat Noach, where the Torah describes Noach as “a righteous person, blameless [‘*tamim*’]in his generations.” Whereas the Torah there describes Noach with two compliments – “*tzadik*” and “*tamim*” – God here tells Noach only that he was a “*tzadik*.” On this basis, the Gemara establishes the famous principle of “*miktzat shevacho shel adam be-fanav*” – that we should express greater praise for people when we are not in their presence then we should in their presence.

Interestingly, *Chazal* elsewhere derive this principle from a different Biblical account. In Sefer Bamidbar, we read of God’s harsh response to Miriam and Aharon’s criticism of Moshe. He appeared to them and to Moshe in the Tent of Meeting, and then summoned Aharon and Miriam outside the tent (Bamidbar 12:5), where he impressed upon them Moshe’s unique stature which they had failed to recognize. Rashi there cites the *Sifrei* as commenting that God summoned Aharon and Miriam outside the tent so that He would not indulge in praise of Moshe in Moshe’s presence.

The inference of this concept from two different sources might suggest that these two passages introduce two subtly distinct rabbinic teachings. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the comment in the *Sifrei* is cited in the name of a *Tanna* – Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya – whereas the remark in the Gemara was stated by an *Amora* – Rav Yirmiya ben Elazar, who lived much later than Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya. We might reasonably assume that if Rav Yirmiya was repeating a law introduced many years earlier, and providing a different Scriptural source for it, his intent was to reveal a new dimension of this law that was not explicated by Rav Elazar ben Azarya’s teaching.

Accordingly, the Tolna Rebbe (in *Heima Yenachamuni*) explained that these two passages refer to two separate concepts. In response to Miriam and Aharon’s murmurings about their brother, God found it necessary to impress upon them Moshe’s unique stature of greatness. *Chazal* infer from this episode that when circumstances require lavishing praise, it should be done in the person’s absence. From the verse in Parashat Noach, however, *Chazal* derive a different principle. In this context, there does not appear to be any reason for why God noted Noach’s righteousness. Noach had already been told that he was being spared from the flood, and so it should, seemingly, have sufficed for God to inform Noach that the time had arrived to enter the ark. The fact that God made a point of saying, “for I have seen you as a righteous man” indicates that giving compliments is something important and worthwhile. The point made by Rav Yirmiya is that although lavish praise should be spoken only in the person’s absence, moderate praise is valuable in a person’s presence. In other words, from the verse in Sefer Bamidbar *Chazal* inferred that lavish praise should not be spoken in a person’s presence, while from the verse here in Parashat Noach they inferred that moderate praise should be spoken in a person’s presence. From Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya’s statement one may have concluded that it is preferable not to compliment people in their presence at all, just as God specifically brought Miriam and Aharon outside, away from their brother, before praising Moshe. Rav Yirmiya therefore clarified that, as we see in God’s remarks to Noach before the flood, it is appropriate, and important, to give people compliments and praise in their presence, even if lavish praise should be spoken only in their absence.

(See also Rav Yissachar Frand’s [“Compliments — In The Presence And Outside The Presence Of A Person.”)](http://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5774-noach/)

Sunday

Before the flood, God instructed Noach to bring two of each species of animal with him into the ark, the exception being “pure” animals, of which he was to bring seven, in order to offer sacrifices to God after the flood (7:2). Rashi comments that the term “*tehora*” (“pure”) is used here the way it is used later in the Chumash, referring to animals which the Torah permits eating. The fact that Noach understood the reference and was able to identify which animals would later be permissible for *Benei Yisrael* to consume, Rashi adds, demonstrates that “Noach learned Torah.”

We might wonder what Rashi’s intent was in making this remark. Why is it significant that Noach “learned Torah,” and why is this point relevant to the context of the kosher animals brought onto the ark to be sacrificed after the flood?

Rashi’s comment perhaps conveys the message that we are incapable of knowing what to “sacrifice” to God unless we learn and study. We cannot decide based on our own intuition and subjective feelings which “offerings” God wants from us, how He wants us to serve Him. The distinction between a “pure” and “impure” sacrifice, between actions which God wants and values, and those which He does not, can be made only by learning, by consulting our Torah tradition. Just as Noach is said to have been able to distinguish between kosher and non-kosher animals solely based on knowledge gained through study, we must likewise distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of serving God based on knowledge, and not on the basis of our intuitive sense.

Monday

After the flood, God decides that He would never again destroy the earth, "*ki yetzer leiv ha-adam ra mi-ne'urav*" – "because the inclination of a person's heart is evil from his youth" (8:21). Human beings' natural, ingrained negative tendencies mitigate our guilt, and thus while we are not absolved entirely of accountability for our wrongdoing, as we are expected to overcome these tendencies, God judges us compassionately and sensitively, and will never again destroy the world on account of our sins.

The *Or Ha-chayim*, commenting on this verse, draws an intriguing parallel to a *halakha* established by the Mishna in Masekhet Bava Kama (4:4). The Mishna there discusses the case of "*shor ha-itztedin*" – a "stadium bull" that kills a person during a bullfight. Normally, an ox that fatally attacks a person must be put to death, as the Torah commands (Shemot 21:28). However, the Mishna states that this law applies only if the ox initiated the assault, as indicated in the Torah's formulation of the law ("*ki yigach*"). If, however, the ox is provoked to act violently, and kills in reaction to this provocation, then it is absolved of responsibility, so-to-speak, and is not put to death. The *Or Ha-chayim* writes that God's proclamation of "*ki yetzer leiv ha-adam ra mi-ne'urav*" reflects a similar concept. We are all, in a sense, "provoked" to sin by the negative tendencies with which we were created. We do not actually initiate our wrongdoing; our sinful actions are the response to the "provocation" of our evil inclination. Of course, as the *Or Ha-chayim* notes, the analogy is far from precise, since we, unlike animals, are endowed with the power of free will and are thus capable and expected to resist our natural inclinations. Nevertheless, the fact that we are "instigated" to sin, and do not initiate the process, significantly reduces our level of accountability.

The Tolna Rebbe suggested developing this analogy further by noting the question raised by several *Acharonim* concerning the case of a "*shor ha-itztedin*." The Gemara (Bava Kama 40b) records a debate among the *Amoraim* as to whether this bull is acceptable as a sacrifice. Although it is not liable to execution, as it killed in response to provocation, Shemuel nevertheless ruled that the fact that it killed a person renders it unworthy of being offered as a sacrifice to God. The accepted *halakha*, however, follows the view of Rav, who maintains that since the bull is not held accountable for its actions, and is deemed entirely innocent, it may be used as a sacrifice (Rambam, *Hilkhot Issurei Mizbei'ach* 4:3). A number of *Acharonim*, including Rav Elchanan Wasserman (*Kovetz Biurim*, Bava Kama 33), wondered how this ruling may be reconciled with the *halakha* established elsewhere (Sanhedrin 80a) that if a pregnant animal killed a person, even the fetus is invalid as a sacrifice. Seemingly, the fetus in such a case bears no more blame for the mother's violent act than a "*shor ha-itztedin*" bears for his violent act. Why would *Halakha* disqualify the fetus of animal that killed a person, but not an ox that killed after being provoked?

The likely answer, as the Tolna Rebbe cites from several later writers, is that the fetus is deemed unworthy not because of direct guilt and culpability, but because of its close association with the mother. Irrespective of the well-known halakhic debate as to whether a fetus is legally considered part of the mother's body ("*ubar yerekh imo*"), a fetus is clearly identified with the mother, such that to some extent, a fetus is formally regarded as a participant in the mother's criminal act. Hence, it is deemed unworthy of being offered as a sacrifice.

Returning to the *Or Ha-chayim*'s analogy, the Tolna Rebbe suggests that the mitigation of our guilt for our wrongdoing depends upon our emotional dissociation from our negative tendencies. As long as we identify with and embrace our negative characteristics, rather than struggling to resist and overcome them, we bear full accountability. If the *yetzer ha-ra* exists within us as a fetus in its mother's womb, as something we welcome or have made peace with, then we cannot excuse our wrongdoing as the product of "provocation." It is only if we treat our negative instincts as a foreign and hostile force which must be confronted and defeated that we become comparable to the "*shor ha-itztedin*" such that our guilt is mitigated.

Tuesday

The Torah tells in Parashat Noach that after the Flood that destroyed the earth, “God remembered Noach” and the people and animals with him on the ark, and began drying the world to make it once again habitable (8:1). We make reference to this verse in the *zikhronot* section of the Rosh Hashanah *musaf* service, when we say, “You also remembered Noach with love…” Interestingly, the author of this text added the word “*be-ahava*” – “with love” – to emphasize that God did not merely remember Noach, but remembered him lovingly.

Rav Avraham Pam (*Ha-metivta*, 1982) explains this emphasis on God’s love of Noach in the context of a broader discussion of Noach’s character. The final verse of Parashat Bereishit states that Noach “found favor in the eyes of the Lord.” Rav Pam cites the work *Erekh Apayim* as explaining this verse on the basis of a comment of the *Sefer Chareidim*, “Whoever does not become angry finds favor [in God’s eyes.” If avoiding anger is the key to “finding favor,” then this perhaps was Noach’s outstanding quality. Whereas the people of his time were guilty of “*chamas*” (6:11), a term generally associated with violence, Noach was peaceful and patient, and this is why he “found favor in the eyes of the Lord” at a time when God deemed mankind no longer worthy of existence.

On this basis, Rav Pam suggested, we might explain the reference to God’s love for Noach in the Rosh Hashanah prayer text. The Gemara in Masekhet Pesachim (113b) lists three types of people who are especially loved by God, and the first of these groups is people who do not become angry. It was Noach’s calm and composed demeanor that earned him God’s special favor and God’s special love.

Rav Pam further noted the Midrash’s comment that when the Torah speaks of God “remembering” Noach, it refers to Noach’s selfless devotion to the animals in the ark, diligently feeding and caring for all the creatures. This quality, Rav Pam asserted, closely relates to Noach’s quality of avoiding anger. Accepting and fulfilling this awesome responsibility is a testament to unlimited patience, which is also the key to avoiding anger. The same extraordinary discipline and patience which enabled Noach to tirelessly and selflessly care for God’s creatures in the ark for many months enabled him as well to remain calm and composed in the face of adversity and provocation. *Chazal* here teach us of the importance of exerting control over our emotions, of enduring hardship and scorn with patience and serenity, without losing our temper or our composure.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Noach of Noach’s attempts after the flood to determine whether or not the waters had sufficiently receded to allow for human habitation on the earth. After sending out the raven which never returned to the ark, Noach sent the dove, which returned to him after finding nowhere to rest in the flooded earth. A week later, Noach sent the dove again, and this time the dove returned with an olive branch that it had plucked from tree, signifying the presence of vegetation in the world.

The *Midrash Tanchuma* (Tetzaveh 27:5), curiously, associates this event with the *mitzva* of kindling the *menorah* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*: “The Almighty said: Just as the dove brought light to the world, you, too, who are compared to a dove – bring olive oil and light candles before Me.” We are commanded to kindle a light in the *Mikdash* just as the dove of Noach’s ark “brought light to the world.”

In what way did the dove “bring light to the world,” and how does this relate to the *mitzva* of kindling the *menorah*? While the Midrash appears to draw an association between the dove’s olive branch and the olive oil used for kindling the *menorah*, we must understand the deeper connection between these two seemingly unrelated contexts.

The dove “brought light into the world” in the sense that it announced the end of the dark period of the Flood. It informed all the world’s inhabitants of that time – Noach and his family – that the world was once again inhabitable, that it was no longer ravaged by floodwaters, and that they no longer needed to seek shelter in an ark. The dove was the harbinger of hope and optimism after a lengthy period of destruction and despair. The Midrash perhaps seeks to teach us that the Torah – which is symbolized by the light of the *menorah* in the Temple – serves a similar purpose on the spiritual plane. It is the harbinger of spiritual hope, so-to-speak, announcing that the world can become a brighter, happier and more inviting place. By creating a society on the foundations of the Torah’s strict ethical and religious code, we are to shine the light of hope upon what is so often a very dark world. The Torah’s message is that we do not have to, and must not, resign ourselves to the “darkness,” to the evil that characterizes much of human existence on earth; that human beings are capable of building a moral, noble and peaceful society. Just as the dove announced that the world had once again become physically hospitable, the Torah announces each day that the world can and one day will become morally hospitable, a place where people live together peacefully, securely, and meaningfully.

Thursday

Rashi, in his famous comments to the opening verse of Parashat Noach, notes the debate among the Sages regarding the implication of the Torah's description of Noach as a righteous person "*be-dorotav*" – "in his generations." One view among the *Amoraim* interprets this term as expressing praise for Noach who lived piously in a generation of corrupt sinners. According to the other opinion, however, the Torah adds the word "*be-dorotav*" not as a compliment to Noach, but to the contrary, to clarify that he was pious only relative to the wicked people of his time. Had he lived in Avraham's generation, he would have been overshadowed by Avraham and not considered especially pious.

Many writers and *darshanim* have raised the question of why the Torah would emphasize the relative nature of Noach's piety. Why is it significant that Noach would not have been regarded as pious in Avraham's time?

Rav Yerucham Levovitz suggested that *Chazal*'s intent is to warn against complacency. Even Noach, who far exceeded all his contemporaries in piety, fell short of his full potential, as he could have achieved more. *Chazal* challenge us to aspire to more than relative greatness, to constantly work to advance even if it seems to us that we have accomplished more than the people around us. The process of spiritual growth never ends, and as long as we have yet to reach the level of Avraham Avinu, our work is still incomplete.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Noach tells the well-known story of the dove sent by Noach from the ark to determine whether or not the earth had again become inhabitable. The first time the dove was sent, it quickly returned to Noach, as it did not find anywhere to land and rest. A week later, Noach sent the dove a second time, and this time the dove managed to spend the entire day out of the ark, and returned in the evening time with an olive leaf in its mouth. At that point, the Torah tells, "Noach knew that the waters had subsided on the earth" (8:11).

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 33:6) raises the question as to the origin of this olive leaf brought to the ark by the dove. One view, startlingly, claimed that the dove brought the leaf from *Gan Eden*, the gates to which opened to allow the bird to enter and pluck a branch.

Already the Ramban noted the obvious difficulty with this Midrashic account of the events. If the olive leaf originated from *Gan Eden*, then how did it show that the floodwaters had receded and the world was becoming again inhabitable? We may reasonably assume that *Gan Eden* was not affected by the Deluge. How, then, did Noach see the dove's olive leaf as proof that the conditions on Earth were improving?

The Ramban answers that according to this view in the Midrash, the "gate" from our world to *Gan Eden* was closed tightly during the Flood to prevent the waters from entering the garden. The fact that the dove brought a leaf from *Gan Eden* showed that this gate had been opened, which in turn showed that the floodwaters had receded.

Regardless, we might suggest that this image, of the dove bringing a leaf from *Gan Eden* as evidence of the receding floodwaters, symbolically conveys an important message about finding hope in periods of hardship. According to this view in the Midrash, apparently, the dove found no food available anywhere in this world, and was thus compelled to fly into *Gan Eden*. The dove did not despair, and extended to the furthest limits – to *Gan Eden* – to find a glimmer of hope, to discover a cause for optimism about a brighter future. Noach, too, found comfort in the discovery of this olive leaf, even though it did not come from the flooded earth. The fact that *Gan Eden* was accessible was enough of an indication that conditions were improving and that life would soon become again viable here in this world. When the world is dark and in turmoil, we can and must try to find hope and optimism wherever it is found, even if this means reaching as far as *Gan Eden*.

The Gemara (Berakhot 48b) tells that after the fall of the city of Beitar, the last stronghold of Bar-Kokhba's army during his revolt against the Romans, the Romans did not allow the Jews to bury the thousands of victims who were killed. When the Romans finally granted permission for the burial, the people discovered that the bodies had not decomposed. In commemoration of this miracle, the Sages of the time instituted the fourth blessing of *birkat ha-mazon*, in which we praise God for His unending beneficence. Remarkably, despite the unspeakable tragedy the nation had suffered, even after the loss of a large percentage of the Jewish People, and with the dashed hopes of imminently regaining sovereignty over *Eretz Yisrael* and rebuilding the Temple, the Sages found something to celebrate and be thankful for. They identified a glimmer of hope, a dim ray of light to grab onto as a source of encouragement. And they thus teach us of the need to go as far as we can – even to *Gan Eden* – to find hope and solace during difficult times, confident that there is an "olive leaf" to provide us with comfort as long as we look for it.

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