**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NOACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Noach (8:7) that after the flood, as the waters subsided, Noach sent a raven from the ark to determine whether or not the earth had dried and become once again habitable. The Torah relates, “*Va-yeitzei yatzo va-shov*” – that the raven flew “back and forth,” constantly returning to the ark, indicating that it had no place to land outside the ark, because water still covered the earth.

Rashi, however, offers a creative interpretation, explaining that the raven actually suspected Noach of desiring an intimate relationship with its mate. This startling explanation is based – as Rashi references – on the Gemara’s account in Masekhet Sanhedrin (108b) of the dialogue that ensured when Noach chose the raven as the first creature to venture out of the ark. The raven protested, the Gemara tells, alleging that Noach deliberately set out to endanger the male raven so he would be able to use the female raven for his own pleasure. Rashi adds that when the Torah writes, “*Va-yeitzei yatzo va-shov*,” it means that the raven never actually left the ark, but rather flew in circles around the ark to keep a watchful eye on Noach, whom he outrageously suspected of desiring its mate.

How might we understand Rashi’s bizarre depiction of the raven’s conduct? What might we learn from the image of a bird neurotically remaining by its mate because of a baseless suspicion?

The clue, perhaps, can be found in Rashi’s remark, “*Lo halakh bi-shlichuto*” – the raven “did not go on its mission” because of its outlandish fears of Noach violating its mate. This depiction is perhaps intended to warn us not to forsake our own “missions” because of unwarranted fears. We are all presented at different times with various kinds of noble and important “missions” to fulfill, opportunities to achieve, to help, or to contribute. Sometimes, though, we are afraid to accept these missions, to seize these opportunities, because of fear – fear of failure, fear of taking away time from other endeavors, or just fear of the unknown. Just as the raven declined its mission because of an imaginary fear, we, too, are sometimes led to decline opportunities for achievement because of baseless fear and anxiety. Rashi’s comments perhaps teach us to think carefully whether our reluctance to undertake new challenges stems from a genuine assessment of our limited time and abilities, or if perhaps our fears unnecessarily and unjustifiably keep us tethered to the “ark” and prevent us from advancing and maximizing our potential to its very fullest.

Sunday

In informing Noach of His decree to flood the earth, God announced to him, “*Keitz kol basar ba lefanai ki male’a ha-aretz chamas*” – “The end of all flesh has come before Me, because the earth has been filled with evil” (6:13).

The conventional understanding of this verse is that it poetically announces the forthcoming calamity. The phrase “*ba lefanai*” (“has come before Me”) means simply that God had decided to bring an end to human life on earth. He told Noach that the end of human has “come before Him” – meaning, that this is the decision He reached. Another possibility (see the Radak and Seforno) is that God refers here to the end of the 120-year period during which He had hoped that the people would repent, as the Torah tells earlier, at the end of Parashat Bereishit (6:3). He now informed Noach that this period had ended, and still, unfortunately, “the earth has been filled with evil,” thus necessitating its destruction.

*Ketav Sofer*, however, suggests an additional explanation. He writes that the phrase “*keitz kol basar ba lefanai*” could be understood to mean that God foresaw the end result of the current state of affairs, that mankind would never regain its morality and goodness. The reason, God then proceeded to explain to Noach, is because “the earth has been filled with evil” – the world was overrun with evildoers, such that there was nobody from whom change could be inspired. As long as a minority of righteous, noble individuals remained, there was hope that their influence would gradually spread, that people would observe, admire and then emulate their example of piety. But once mankind reached the point where “the earth has been filled with evil,” and there were no longer any models of righteous behavior from which others could learn, there no longer remained any hope of spiritual recovery.

*Ketav Sofer*’s understanding of this verse perhaps provides us with a valuable source of encouragement, assuring us of our ability to positively influence the world, each of us in his or her own individual way. As long as we ourselves aspire and work towards living a noble life of religious devotion, we are capable of effecting positive change, at least to some slight extent. By setting a positive example for the people around us, we make a valuable contribution, helping to improve the world to one degree or another. When we see or hear of evil “filling the earth,” we should not despair or feel discouraged, but should instead recommit ourselves to strive for the highest moral and religious standards we can, trusting that our personal pursuit of greatness will positively influence the people around us and thereby have a small but not insignificant impact upon the world.

Monday

We read in Parashat Noach that after exiting the ark following the flood, Noach built an altar and offered sacrifices to God (8:20). The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 37:2) interprets the word “*va-yiven*” (“built”) in this verse to mean “*nitbonein*” – that Noach “understood,” or inferred that he was expected to offer sacrifices. God had instructed him to bring one male and female of every species, but to bring seven of every kosher species (7:2), and Noach understood that this meant he was to offer some of the kosher animals as sacrifices. If God required saving additional animals of these special species, Noach realized, he must have expected these animals to be brought as offerings.

The Midrash’s comments seem to imply that Noach offered sacrifices after being rescued from the flood only because “*nitbonein*,” because he made a logical inference from God’s commands before the flood. We might wonder, should such a gesture not have been intuitive and instinctive? Wouldn’t we have expected Noach to have been overflowing with gratitude, and to feel a burning desire within him to express his appreciation to God? He and his family were the only people on earth to be rescued, and he had just emerged safely from a grueling, yearlong ordeal inside the ark with the animals. Did he need logical deduction to reach the conclusion that he should bring a thanksgiving offering to God?

One simple answer, perhaps, is that this logical inference was needed to determine the method of expressing his gratitude. Certainly, Noach intuitively felt a desire to show appreciation to God for rescuing him and his family, but he understood from God’s command to bring extra kosher animals into the ark that the way he was expected to express these feelings was through sacrificial offerings.

[Rav Moshe Taragin](https://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/935463/rabbi-moshe-taragin/pre-shiur-conversations-the-world-of-tefillah-part-2-not-feeling-it-but-still-praying-praying-for-psychological-release/) offered a different answer, suggesting that indeed, the obvious response is not always instinctive. Sometimes, we intellectually know what should be emotionally intuitive, but isn’t. The message of the Midrash might precisely be that we need to act upon our rational understanding even when our intellect and our emotions are not in synch. Even when we do not feel instinctively driven and motivated, we must do what we rationally recognize to be what is expected of us.

Rav Taragin applied this message specifically to the area of daily prayer. We should, ideally, rise each morning with a natural, instinctive desire to speak to God, to thank Him for all He has granted us, and to plead with Him for all that we need. However, we cannot reasonably expect ourselves to be emotionally driven and inspired to pray every morning, afternoon and evening. At times when we do not experience this intuitive drive, we must resort to “*nitbonein*” – our rational faculties, which understand the importance and the obligatory nature of our daily prayers. Our religious commitments must not depend on our emotional condition. Even when we do not feel naturally inclined to fulfill our obligations, even those which ought to be intuitively felt, we must act upon our rational understanding of these obligations and fulfill them to the best of our ability.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Noach introduces us to Nimrod, describing that “he began to be a warrior in the land” (10:8). The Ramban explains that Nimrod was the first one to wage wars, conquer land and establish a powerful kingdom.

The Torah adds that Nimrod was a “*gibor tzayid lifnei Hashem*” (10:9), which Rashi, based on the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 37:2), explains to mean that Nimrod “trapped the minds of people with his mouth, misleading them to rebel against God.” Nimrod succeeded through his rhetorical skill in mobilizing the people’s support to mount a rebellion against God. Rashi presumably refers here to his comments to the preceding verse, where he writes (based on *Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel*) that it was Nimrod who initiated the project of the Tower of Bavel. This enterprise, to which God reacted very harshly, marked a rebellion of sorts against God’s rule over the earth, and Nimrod was the one who instigated this revolt, using his deceptive rhetoric to draw support for the construction of the tower, and thereby to bring the people under his rule.

Rav Yosef Salant, in his *Be’er Yosef*, draws our attention to Rashi’s later comments (11:1) where, based on the Midrash, he explains the rationale behind the idea of building the tower. One possibility, Rashi writes, is that the people thought, “He has no right to choose for Himself the upper worlds! Let us rise to the heavens and wage war against Him!” Another explanation cited by Rashi is that the people reflected on the catastrophic flood which had destroyed the earth, and concluded that “every 1,656 years, the firmament collapses,” causing a flood, and so they decided, “Let us make supports for it.”

Rav Salant observes that if, as Rashi writes earlier, it was Nimrod who misled the people to accept these arguments, then the story of Nimrod serves as an effective warning about the tactics commonly used by aspiring leaders in their determined effort to achieve power. First, these figures deceive the people into thinking that they are fighting for them, for their rights. Just as Nimrod proclaimed to the people, “He has no right to choose for Himself the upper worlds,” similarly, many leaders succeed in attracting support by convincing the masses that they are being victimized and treated unfairly, and that they – the aspiring leaders – need the people’s support in order to fight the injustice perpetrated against them.

Secondly, leadership figures often try to win support by sowing fear, by warning of an impending disaster which they promise to protect against. Nimrod, according to the Midrash, came up with a theory that a second flood would ravage the earth, and in this way, he succeeded in marshalling the people’s support for him and his project. This is another common strategy devised by aspiring rulers – instilling fear within people, convincing them that they face grave danger from which only they – the leaders – can shield them. And thus the Midrash here alerts us to the need for caution when would-be leaders try to convince us that we should support them because we are being victimized, or that we face danger. These are ancient strategies that are often used to feign altruism as a cover for the vain lust for power, to bolster one’s own standing by pretending to truly care about the public.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Noach (6:11) famously tells that God decided to bring a flood to destroy the earth upon seeing that the world had become filled with “*chamas*” (literally, “aggression,” or “violence”). Rashi, based on the Gemara (108a), explains the word “*chamas*” to mean “theft,” and this crime, the Gemara comments, is what sealed the decree of annihilation.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 31:4) adds that both the thieves themselves and their victims were deemed guilty of “theft” and thus worthy of being punished. The thieves, of course, were guilty of literal theft, which the Midrash terms “*chimus mamon*” – “monetary aggression,” forcibly seizing that which belonged to others. The victims, by contrast, were guilty of “*chimus devarim*” – “verbal aggression.” Apparently, they committed a “crime” by the way they responded to the real crimes committed against them.

The obvious question arises, why would a victim’s grievance and outcry constitute a crime? Why would the victims of theft in Noach’s time be punishable for verbally expressing outrage against those who victimized them?

The Alter of Slobodka explained the Midrash’s comment to mean that the victims’ outrage was exaggerated and incommensurate with the crime. They reacted even to minor offenses with vicious rage, as though a major crime was committed against them. And this overreaction amounted to “*chimus devarim*” – verbal aggression, unwarranted hateful speech. While it is certainly acceptable and legitimate to express grievances and voice complaints against wrongful conduct, this must be done reasonably, appropriately, and in a manner proportionate to the offense. Overreacting to a wrongful action is itself a wrongful action – even if that overreaction involves merely words.

[Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm](https://archives.yu.edu/gsdl/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASHdbb1.dir/doc.pdf) eloquently developed the Alter’s teaching, formulating what he termed an “ethic of protest”:

The sin of the robbed, he [the Alter] tells us, was in over-reaction: the criminal may have stolen from them a dollar, but their outcry, their weeping, their lamentation, their indignation, was of the order of a man from whom a thousand dollars had been stolen. They were over-indignant. True, an injury was done to them, but their protest was incommensurate with the degree of that injury. This excess of the protest over the wrong was in itself an injustice. It…constituted a kind of psychological aggression, a violent moral assault on and abuse of a man who was less guilty than that of which he was accused. So that those who were the prey of the thieves are themselves condemned of a form of violence no less culpable because it was more subtle.

…Our religion has never consented to passivity in the face of evil. It has always preached resistance to wrong and to injustice… Certainly…there ought to be criticism and protest — but never immoderately. The reaction must always correspond to the action, the protest to the injustice. An extravagant reaction is in itself, in its extremism, an act of injustice against one who does not deserve that extent of protest. Hence, what our tradition teaches us is – an ethic of protest… Now, there is much that is wrong and corrupt and rotten in our society and culture that deserves objection, remonstration, dissent, and criticism. But there is such a thing as an ethic of protest… In excess, moral energy produces immoral results…

Both in our personal lives, as well as when it comes to broader societal problems, we must avoid “*chimus devarim*” – verbal overreaction to wrongful behavior. While it is often legitimate, and even important, to express grievances, this must be done in a manner that is suitable to the situation, and victims must never reserve for themselves the right to do or say anything he wishes by virtue of their being victims. Even if our grievances are valid, we must respond appropriately, without expressing exaggerated outrage over relatively minor offenses.

Thursday

The opening verse of Parashat Noach describes Noach as “a righteous man in his generations,” and Rashi famously cites two views in explaining the meaning of the term “in his generations.” One view understands that the Torah emphasizes that Noach lived piously despite living among sinful people, indicating that had he lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have achieved even greater heights. According to the second view, to the contrary, the Torah here emphasizes that Noach was considered pious only in relation to his corrupt contemporaries, and had he lived in Avraham’s time, he would not have been regarded as righteous.

The Alter of Novardok suggested that at the root of this argument is the question as to the motivation behind Noach’s piety. According to the first view, Noach truly and sincerely sought to live a righteous life, and living among sinners posed a considerable challenge in his quest to realize to these aspirations. Thus, had he lived in a society of righteous people, he would have achieved a far greater stature. According to the other view, however, Noach was driven to strive for piety only because of the evil all around him. Noach realized that in order to avoid coming under the sinful influence of his contemporaries, he needed to resist this influence by being especially righteous. Thus, according to this opinion, had he lived in a different age, among morally upstanding people, when he would not have needed to make a special effort to avoid evil influences, he would not have achieved an impressive level of piety.

[Rav Nechemya Raanan](https://www.etzion.org.il/he/%D7%A9%D7%97%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%A8-%D7%9E%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%AA%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%97%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%94) added that the Alter of Novardok’s understanding of this debate should be viewed in light of the Alter’s general emphasis on the importance of freeing oneself from societal influence. The Alter taught his students that they must avoid feeling pressured to follow their peers’ expectations, and must always act upon their convictions without any concern for how they are viewed by others. In fact, the students in Novardok would train themselves to avoid feelings of peer pressure by intentionally acting in an unusual manner in public, to accustom themselves to disregarding ridicule. This extreme method was employed to engender complete freedom from societal pressure, to ensure that they would always do what they felt what was correct rather than compromise their principles in order to please the people around them. In his analysis of Noach’s piety, the Alter goes even further, asserting that even societal pressure which pushes one in the proper direction must be avoided. If one acts righteously only because of the surrounding influences – either positive influences, or, as in Noach’s case, negative influences which must be actively opposed – then his sincerity is deficient. Our spiritual aspirations must be fueled by a genuine desire to achieve, and not by a desire to please the righteous people around us or to oppose the evildoers around us. Certainly, when we can, we should look for models of greatness to emulate as sources of guidance and inspiration, and we should take note of models of sinfulness from which to learn how not to act. But our ambition to lead spiritually accomplished lives must stem from a genuine yearning to live righteously, and not from external pressures.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Noach (7:23) tells that the flood eradicated all living creatures on earth, such that “*va-yishaer akh Noach* *va-asher ito ba-teiva*” – “Only Noach and those with him on the ark remained.” Rashi cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* as detecting in the phrase “*akh Noach*” an indication that Noach endured great suffering during the period he spent in the ark. According to one source, Noach was “groaning and expectorating blood because of the burden of the animals and beasts.” His suffering, according to this view, stemmed from the overwhelming pressure of caring for all the creatures on the ark. Rashi then cites a different source explaining “*akh Noach*” to mean that Noach bled because he once arrived late to feed the lion, and the lion bit his hand.

The Klausenberger Rebbe (*Yetziv Pitgam*, Parashat Noach) offers a creative theory to explain the meaning behind these different views in the Midrash. Commenting on the first verse in Parashat Noach, which describes Noach as a “righteous man,” Rashi famously cites two opinions regarding Noach’s piety. One view explains that Noach was righteous despite living among sinful people, and would have achieved even greater levels of righteousness had he lived in more moral society. According to the other view, however, Noach was righteous relative to his corrupt generation, and had he lived in the times of Avraham, he would not have been considered righteous. Some (e.g. Maharshal, cited by *Siftei Chakhamim*) explained this second view to mean that although Noach was a righteous man, he failed to show concern for the wicked people of his time. Unlike Avraham, who made an active effort to positively influence the people around him, and who prayed for the welfare of even the wicked people of Sedom, Noach – according to this opinion in the Midrash – looked apathetically upon his sinful contemporaries. Although he admirably lived a righteous life despite the evil all around him, he was expected to make some effort to uplift, or at least pray for, the people of his time. The second view brought by Rashi faults Noach for this failure, and thus claims that he would not have been considered righteous during the time of Avraham, who was not only personally righteous, but also extended himself on behalf of the sinful people of his generation. The first view, by contrast, disagrees, and maintains that Noach did, in fact, concern himself with the state of his contemporaries, and indeed prayed and made efforts to help them change their behavior.

The Klausenberger Rebbe suggested that the two Midrashic readings of “*akh Noach*” cited by Rashi correspond to these different opinions. According to one view, Noach worked tirelessly and devotedly tending to the animals – symbolizing his devotion to the people of his time, who had morally degenerated to the point where they resembled, in a sense, animals. According the other opinion, however, Noach was irresponsible in tending to the lion – a symbolic depiction of his neglectings the needs of the people of his time. He did not fulfill his responsibilities to pray on behalf of his contemporaries, and this is the deeper meaning of the image of his arriving late to feed the lion. Just as Noach was expected to care for all the animals under his charge promptly and responsibly, so was he expected to exert efforts to help the people of his time, and according to one view, Noach is criticized for failing to do so.

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