YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat NOach**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**"A Man Among Them to Build a Fence, to Stand in the Breach"**

Summarized by Itai Weiss

Translated by David Strauss

Our Rabbis taught: What did the Holy One, blessed be He, reply to Noach when he exited the ark and saw the entire world destroyed and began to cry over it, saying: "Master of the Universe, You are called merciful; You should have shown mercy to your creatures!" The Holy One, blessed be He, replied to him: "Foolish shepherd! Now you say this, but not when I spoke to you in a gentle manner, as it is written: 'Make you an ark of gopher wood… And I will bring the flood… to destroy all flesh… And the Lord said to Noach… For you [alone] have I seen righteous before Me in this generation' (*Bereishit* 6:14-7:1). I gave you so much time to ask for mercy for the world, but when you heard that you would remain in the ark, you didn't consider the distress of the world, and now when the world is gone, you open your mouth, setting before me requests and supplications.” (*Zohar Chadash*, vol. 1 [Torah], *Parashat Noach*]

These are harsh words. The *Zohar* criticizes Noach for not having pleaded for mercy on behalf of his contemporaries before the flood, but only afterwards. This criticism may be familiar in the context of a contrast between Noach and Moshe Rabbeinu, the faithful shepherd:

And Moshe returned to the Lord, and said: Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them a god of gold. Yet now, if You will forgive their sin – and if not, erase me, I pray You, from Your book which You have written. (*Shemot* 32:31-32)

*Chazal* noted that the letters in the word *mecheini*, "erase me" (*mem-chet-nun-yod*) allude to what is stated in this week's *haftara*:

For this is as the waters of Noach (*mei Noach*; *mem-yod nun-chet*)to Me; for as I have sworn that the waters of Noach should no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. (*Yeshayahu* 54:9)

The flood is referred to in connection to Noach – "the waters of Noach” – because Noach, unlike Moshe, did not ask for mercy for the people.

The difficulty with this explanation is in the idea that a person who does not ask for mercy for his generation can be called "righteous" by God, as Noach was. How could it be, if this is the case, that “Noach found favor in the eyes of God (*Bereishit* 6:8) – as was also said about Moshe: "For you have found favor in My eyes" (*Shemot* 33:17)? How does Noach's righteousness find expression, if not through his prayers? Was it through meticulous observance of the laws of tithes?! Through his family’s modest attire?!

To answer this question, let us consider another generation that was similar to the generation of the flood – the generation of the destruction of the Temple:

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Now, you, son of man, will you judge, will you judge the bloody city? Then cause her to know all her abominations… say: Thus says the Lord God: O city that sheds blood in its midst, that her time may come, and that makes idols to herself to become impure… Son of man, say to her: You are a land that is not purified, nor rained upon on the day of indignation… Her priests have done violence to My law, and have profaned My holy things; they have not differentiated between the holy and the mundane, neither have they taught [the difference] between impure and pure, and have hidden their eyes from My *Shabbatot*, and I am profaned among them. Her officers in her midst are like wolves ravening prey: to shed blood, to destroy souls, so as to obtain [dishonest] gain… The people of the land have used oppression and committed robbery, and have wronged the poor and needy, and have oppressed the stranger unlawfully. **And I sought for a man among them to build a fence, to stand in the breach before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none**. I have [therefore] poured out My indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; their own way have I brought upon their heads, says the Lord God. (*Yechezkel* 22:1-31)

In order to ask for mercy for the people of Israel, it is not enough to supplicate before God. What is needed is someone who will stand in the breach, who will assume responsibility, and only then ask for mercy.

When Moshe hears about Israel's sin involving the golden calf, he asks God for time to take responsibility and restore order. God allows him to do so, and Moshe goes down to do so:

And he took the calf which they had made, and he burnt it with fire and ground it to powder… then Moshe stood in the gate of the camp, and said: Whoever is on the Lord's side, let him come to me… Let every man put his sword upon his thigh and go to and fro, from gate to gate, throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moshe said to the people: You have sinned a great sin; and now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I shall make atonement for your sin. (*Shemot* 32:19-30)

Moshe breaks up the dancing in the camp, takes the people’s gold and jewelry, and stands at the gate and calls out: “Whoever is on the Lord's side, let him come to me.” He probably feared they would throw him into the fire! Moshe could have thrown up his hands and given up from the start, but he stood his ground.

Only after taking responsibility and engaging in practical action could Moshe supplicate before God.

Another example can be found in *Chazal*’s explanation of a reason Avraham’s descendants were condemned to slavery in Egypt: Avraham did not assume responsibility for the people offered to him by the king of Sedom (*Nedarim* 32a). I trust Avraham's considerations not to do this and understand that they were very weighty, but for this very same reason, Avraham could not save Sedom; all his supplications were of no avail. From the moment that a sin occurs with no one standing in the breach, it is no longer possible to plead for mercy.

Let us return to Noach. Without a doubt, Noach prayed for mercy for the members of his generation even before the flood – but he did not take responsibility for them. Presumably he had good reasons: perhaps he was focused on the education of his children, who were to re-establish the world after the flood; maybe he thought he had no chance of changing anything. It is possible to judge Noach in two ways on this point – positively, by explaining that the problem was with this generation and not with him, or negatively, by arguing that he didn’t try hard enough.

The Rambam's discussion of Avraham indicates his attitude toward Noach:

There was no one in the world who recognized or knew Him, except for [a few] individuals: for example, Chanoch, Metushelach, Noach, Shem, and Ever. The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world – the patriarch Avraham – was born…

When he recognized and knew Him, he began to formulate replies to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and debate with them, telling them that they were not following the path of truth. He broke their idols and began to teach the people that it is fitting to serve only the God of the world.… When he overcame them with his proofs, the king sought to kill him and a miracle was performed for him, and he departed to Charan and began to stand up and call out in a great voice to the whole world and teach them that there is one God for the entire world, and [only] He is fitting to serve…

And when the people would gather around him and ask him about his statements, he would explain [them] to each one of them according to their understanding, until they turned to the path of truth. Ultimately, thousands and myriads gathered around him. These are the men of the house of Avraham. He planted in their hearts this great fundamental principle, composed texts about it, and taught it to Yitzchak, his son. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:2)

The words of the Rambam are clear. Avraham called out with a loud voice, took responsibility for the entire world, and gathered thousands of people around him – he was "the pillar of the world." Noach, on the other hand, did not meet this description. The Rambam's words should be read against the background of the period in which he lived, against the background of his Epistle to Yemen. Islam dominated North Africa, Spain, and the East; Christianity dominated Ashkenaz and France. These two religions shed rivers of Jewish blood, and it might be expected that people would feel that God had abandoned Israel. The Rambam, like Avraham before him, wrote his book – he composed the *Mishneh Torah* and philosophical texts, and he gathered thousands after him. This is assuming responsibility and standing in the breach.

Our generation has its own challenges. We also need people “to build a fence, to stand in the breach.” Today, not enough people from the yeshiva take on the task of education. Who will take responsibility for the Torah study of the people of Israel in general, and of religious Zionism in particular, in the next generation? To what extent do we succeed in living our lives with a sense of mission? *Parashat Noach* sets these questions before us, and we must give a reckoning for them.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Noach* 5778.]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)