**"Also Noach You Remembered with Love"**

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Translated by David Strauss

### I. From Justice to Mercy

At the heart of the *Zikhronot* blessing in the Rosh Ha-shana liturgy stands Noach, who was chosen to exemplify the manner in which God remembers His creatures with love:

Also Noach You remembered with love, granting him merciful aid when You sent the flood to destroy all creatures because of their evil doings.

Because of his record that came to You, Lord our God, You made his descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth, as the sand of the sea. As it is written in Your Torah: "And God remembered Noach and all the animals that were with him in the ark; and God made a wind blow over the earth and the waters abated" (*Bereishit* 8:1).

*Chazal* emphasized the significance of this section by placing it precisely in the middle of the *Amida* prayer: It is preceded by the *Malkhuyot* blessing and the first half of the *Zikhronot* blessing, and it is followed by the second half of the *Zikhronot* blessing and the *Shofarot* blessing. But beyond its central location in the fabric of the blessings, this section which deals with the remembrance of Noach has an important substantive role, as it shifts the person engaged in prayer from the attribute of justice to the attribute of mercy; from chapters of prayer which emphasize the painstaking meticulousness of Divine justice to those parts of the liturgy which give expression to God's mercy and compassion for all of His creatures.

The *Malkhuyot* blessing and the first half of the *Zikhronot* blessing emphasize the lofty majesty, the remote splendor, and the sublime exaltedness of the Master of the universe. God's infinite might and power find expression in His creation of the world and sovereignty over it. The focus of the *Malkhuyot* blessing is the hope for a future in which God's kingdom will reveal itself before all of mankind. In this blessing, man is a subject who recognizes his monarch's kingship, stands before Him for judgment and is brought to justice for all his deeds and sins. The *Zikhronot* blessing continues this line of thought and describes the way that God – in his role as Supreme Judge – summons all of mankind every year to stand for judgment before Him. The uncompromising nature of God's review and the fear and trembling that characterize it are described in the *U-Netaneh Tokef* prayer, which is recited before *Kedusha*, the roots of which are deeply rooted in the manner in which *Chazal* understood Divine justice:

"And it shall be very tempestuous (*nis'ara*) round about Him" (*Tehillim* 50:3), which teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, is particular with those round about Him even for matters as light as a single hair (*se'ara*).

R. Nechonia derived the same lesson from here: "God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints and to be held in reverence by all that are about Him" (*Tehillim* 89:8).

R. Chanina said: If a man says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is lax in the execution of justice, his life shall be outlawed, as it is stated: "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are judgment" (*Devarim* 32:4). (*Bava Kama* 50a)

With the opening of the second half of the *Zikhronot* blessing, we find ourselves in an entirely different world. The punctilious and stringent world of the attribute of justice gives way to a world of Divine love, of compassion and of remembrance permeated with fondness. God – the Master of all who dwells on high, and who is familiar to us in this image from the *Aleinu Leshabe'ach* prayer – joins together with man, His partner in the covenant, and the two of them lovingly remember the shared commitment and the close connection from years past. The imagery appearing in the *Zikhronot* verses describe the connection between God and the people of Israel as similar to the connection between a beloved child and his father, or between a trusted friend and his fellow, and not as the subservience of a subject to his master. The *Shofarot* blessing as well, though it emphasizes God's exaltedness, comes to describe revelation and redemption.

The transition between the two worlds takes place at the point where Noach makes his appearance, and he is apparently the means through which the transition is made. But why did Noach merit symbolizing this transition? Many other figures were saved by God by virtue of a covenant or commitment; why then was it specifically Noach who was chosen? Moreover, the Torah relates that "Noach was a righteous man and perfect in his generation" (*Bereishit* 6:9), and God testifies about him: "For you I have seen righteous before Me in this generation" (*Bereishit* 7:1). Noach, then, was not saved merely by virtue of a covenant or commitment, but also because of his noble personal traits. Why, then, did *Chazal* choose Noach as an example of a person who was saved from some severe decree by virtue of God's compassion?

### II. The World of Justice

As stated, the beginning of the *Zikhronot* blessing describes a world of justice. The blessing opens with a festive declaration of the absolute and meticulous demands of the Master of the universe and of His infinite wisdom and power. These two join together to achieve absolute Divine justice:

You remember Your ancient work, and are mindful of all that was formed in days of old.

All secrets and countless mysteries from the beginning of time are open to You, for there is no forgetting before Your throne of glory; there is not a thing hidden from Your eyes.

You remember every deed, and nobody is kept out of Your sight.

All things are well known to You, Lord our God, who looks to the end of all generations, for from the beginning, from the very first, You make known the decree of a memorial day for the remembrance of the manifold deeds of untold humanity…

On this day sentence is pronounced upon countries for war or peace, for famine or abundance. On this day mortals are recorded for life or death. Who is not called to account on this day?

The idea that a person is brought to justice for his actions before God, who does not overlook a single event or detail, is a cornerstone of Judaism. This idea reflects the identification of God's judgment with absolute justice and pure truth. The *Shema* ends with the call: "The Lord your God is truth," and thereby establishes "truth" as an essential trait of God. The beginning of the *Zikhronot* blessing outlines God's work in this world, and spells out God's demands of us in severe terms. This is the same "decree of a memorial day" that is mentioned in the opening section of the *Zikhronot* blessing, that was implanted in this world by God from the time of the creation.

### III. The Necessity of Repentance

However, a world of truth – that is founded on the attribute of justice – is not devoid of problems. Indeed, such a world arouses awe and is filled with majesty, but it leaves hardly any room for repentance. Absolute justice demands punishment for every sin, and if every human action is accompanied by a price tag, what place is there for repentance? The sweeping demands of truth do not allow overlooking, forgetting, forgiving or showing understanding for error or sin. The absolute nature of truth and justice pulls the rug out from under the possibility of repentance and atonement.

Indeed, the only policy that accords with the attribute of justice is that of precise and meticulous punishment. Repentance, therefore, could only have been conceived by the attribute of mercy. The idea of repentance contradicts the demands expressed by the attribute of justice, as was stated in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Makkot* 2:6):

Wisdom was asked: What is the punishment for a sinner? It replied: "Evil pursues sinners" (*Mislei* 13:21).

Prophecy was asked: What is the punishment for a sinner? It answered them: "A soul that sins will die" (*Yechezkel* 18:20).

The Torah was asked: What is the punishment for a sinner? It answered them: Let him bring a guilt offering and be atoned for.

The Holy One, blessed be He, was asked: What is the punishment for a sinner? He said to them: Let him repent, and he will be atoned for.

This midrash portrays repentance as an idea that wisdom and reason cannot accept. But God – King of the universe – acts against the counsel of His advisors, and recognizes the power of repentance despite the demand for truth and justice.

Indeed, man's survival in the created world is conditional on a more forgiving and less exacting providence. The capacity for error characterizes the human race, and a world populated by human beings must allow their existence. If Divine wisdom wanted to create a world for man, who is liable to err, the possibility of forgiveness must be implanted in it. Repentance is, indeed, alien to the world of justice, but it is impossible to describe a world for mortals without it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This principle, that man is liable to sin and therefore cannot exist without repentance, is well-expressed in the book of *Tehillim*. In the chapter that describes the kindness that God showers upon man, King David counts among God's acts of kindness the forgiveness that He grants His creatures (*Tehillim* 103:8-14):

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in kindness. He will not always chide; neither will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us after our sins; or repaid us according to our iniquities… as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows how we are formed; He remembers that we are dust.

Likewise, in his great declaration of repentance in the aftermath of his sin with Bat-Sheva, King David asserts that God must forgive sinners, for man was born as a sinner and he sins by his very nature (*Tehillim* 51:7): "Behold, I was shaped in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." King David does not argue that man lacks free will or that he is irredeemably corrupt. His claim is that failure and deficiency are built into human nature, and therefore they must be recognized and accepted in a world in which human beings live. When God decided to fill His world with people, He was compelled to provide them with a haven for purification and renewal, so that they could cleanse themselves of their sins and rid themselves of the stains of their transgressions. To this end, God created repentance.

### iv. Noach – A Human *Tzaddik*

As stated above, it is precisely at the point of transition – on the seam between the world of absolute justice and the world populated by human beings, where repentance is possible – that Noach appears. While it is true that Noach is not mentioned in the Torah as having repented, nor did *Chazal* see him as a model for penitents, nevertheless the story of Noach is vital for understanding the development of the idea of repentance.

Noach symbolizes the weakness and feebleness of man. Noach is an anti-hero, a person forced by circumstances into becoming responsible for the survival of the human race. The Torah does not describe Noach in detail, but merely relates that he was a *tzaddik*. It thereby leaves ample room for trying to understand Noach's nature. What kind of person was Noach? Was he a truly righteous man, a foundation of the world, whose virtues protect the entire generation, or perhaps he was merely an average person, who has both virtues and weaknesses?

The Torah’s description Noach before the flood is, indeed, relatively sparse, but his actions after the flood give us clearer picture of his character. After the flood, Noach is described as "a man of the earth" (*Bereishit* 9:20), whose love of strong drink causes him humiliation and difficulties.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, the Midrash does not hesitate to describe Noach as a passive character, lacking leadership qualities, and devoid of sensitivity to the spiritual state of the surrounding society. Noach reacts to events, but is incapable of and uninterested in initiating positive steps to improve the world. He is, indeed, a man of conscience and an upright person – and maintaining personal integrity in a corrupt society is a praiseworthy achievement – but he is certainly not a hero or a truly righteous man who can serve as a symbol for future generations. In fact, Noach is viewed by *Chazal* as a default choice: Somebody had to be saved so that humanity not be wiped out, and Noach was the best candidate available.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Thus Noah stands in for each and every one of us. Fundamentally, he is an upright person with good intentions, but he also has his weaknesses. He is not an exemplary character like Adam or the patriarch Avraham, but rather an average person, who is suddenly called upon to save the human race. He is, indeed, a *tzaddik*, but a "normal" *tzaddik*.

If God remembered Noach with love, then there is hope for all of us, because we are all essentially the children of Noach. We too, like Noach, sometimes sin, and we are unable to meet the demands of absolute justice. Noach's fate is proof that God's mercy will prevail and that we too will be remembered with love and compassion on the Day of Judgment.

### v. From the Children of God to the Children of Noach

In addition to being an example of each and every one of us, Noach plays another role in the *Zikhronot* blessing. Just as the remembrance of Noach is set in the liturgy at the point of transition between justice and mercy, so too the story of Noach expresses in the Torah a similar reversal.

A careful reading of *Parashat Bereishit* teaches that the world before the flood, in which Noach grew up, was judged by God with the precise and absolute standards of justice. The main characters in this world are great heroes, who try to conquer the universe and leave their impression on it. Starting with Adam who wanted to be like God, through Kayin who fought with his brother over control of the world, and ending with Lemech and his descendants – they are all heroic and charismatic figures. The uniqueness of that generation was strengthened by the mysterious "children of God," who are mentioned at the end of *Parashat Bereishit*. Be they who they may be, their name undoubtedly testifies to the fact that they were not ordinary people, and there is also no doubt that the actions attributed to them – "And they took them wives of all whom they chose" (*Bereishit* 6:2) – indicates their low moral level.

Noach's mediocre and anemic character stands out against this background. Noach is passive and pulled along, and even his sin – relative to the sins of his forefathers – is gray and routine. But precisely for this reason, God's attitude towards the first ten generations of mankind appears to have been more stringent and exacting than his attitude toward Noach and his children. Noach is an anti-hero in a world of heroes, who succeeds in maintaining his moral stance in a world full of corruption and depravity. God's choosing of Noach reflects the choice of the type of person that he represents over the generation of heroes that came before him. The Torah prefers Noach's stability and good intentions, despite his limitations and despite his failures that were known from the outset, over the heroism and charisma of the generation of Enosh. The assertion with which *Parashat Bereishit* ends –"And Noach found favor in the eyes of God" (*Bereishit* 6:8) – refers not to Noach alone, but to the model of person that he represents. God chooses to forego the possibility of establishing a world of absolute truth and justice, and He prefers a world which has understanding for sinners, and is therefore filled also with love, kindness and compassion.

The justice meted out to the people living in the world that was created anew after the flood was carried out through the loving prism of the attribute of mercy. God gave explicit expression to this in the covenant relating to the rainbow (*Bereishit* 9:11-15):

And I will establish My covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of the flood… And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: and I will remember my covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.

God's choice of Noach, His loving redemption, and His entering into a covenant with Him, raise our hope that we too will merit forgiveness and redemption on Judgment Day. From the time that God chose Noach, repentance became a necessary component of the world. We mention on Rosh Ha-shana the story of Noach because this story reflects the transition from the original, tough, and absolute justice, to a more compassionate and flexible justice. In the *Zikhronot* blessing, which emphasizes Rosh Ha-shana's identity as the Day of Judgement, we beseech God that He should forgive our unavoidable sins, and relate to us with love and compassion as He related in his day to Noach, the human *tzaddik*.

1. *Chazal* alluded to this in a midrash which lists "three things that Moshe said before the Holy One, blessed be He, and the latter said to him: You have taught Me" (*Bemidbar Rabba* 19, 33). The three things reflect the difference beteen the criteria of absolute justice, with which the world was founded, and the more human criteria that are crucial for the possibility of its continued existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the other hand, it might be argued that Noach's escape to the bottle reflects his being a broken-hearted and guilt-ridden survivor, who witnessed the collapse of society and the destruction of the world, and who was left as an isolated soul with nobody else to lean upon. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the description of Noach as "a man of the earth," which teaches us that he was not in his essence a man of the spirit or a truly righteous man. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This description of Noach emerges from many midrashim, among which is the midrash about the lion that injured Noach when he tried to feed it (*Bereishit Rabba* 28, 9). The message that emerges from the midrash is that even though Noach was not personally worthy of being saved, he had to be saved in order to ensure the survival of the human race. Needless to say, there are also opposite midrashim, which see Noach as an exceptionally righteous and unique character. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)