



## PARSHAS NOACH – RABBI JONATHAN SHOOTER

### What Noach Lived Through!

There is a famous dispute regarding the verse describing Noach as “a righteous man...in his generations” (*Bereishis* 6:9). Rashi comments that “some of our Rabbis interpret this as praise, that even in his generation he was righteous, despite the great evil going on around him. Others interpret the verse as somewhat derogatory; he was righteous only in his generation, but had he been around during the time of Avraham he would not have been anything special.” We see that Rashi gives more credit to those who interpret it as a positive praise, calling them “some of our Rabbis”, while those who interpret it as a criticism are called merely “others.”

There is a beautiful explanation from Rav Ilan Kodosh, based on *Pirkei Avos*, that says that one should judge every person favorably. The explanation is that if one sees someone doing an action that could be interpreted in one of two ways, either that he is sinning, or that he’s acting correctly, one should judge him favorably. Rashi is alluding to this idea, that when the Torah says Noach was righteous in his generations, one should choose the explanation that views him favorably. That is why he calls the people who interpret it this way “our Rabbis,” while the ones who interpret it negatively are called “others.”

Further on in the *parashah*, Hashem instructed Noach, “A light shall you make for the ark” (*Bereishis* 6:16). Rashi explains that according to one opinion this was a window, while a second opinion says it was made of a precious stone. The Pardes Yosef explains that the two arguments are really one. The opinion that says there was a window in the ark is also of the opinion that Noach was righteous by all standards; therefore, he was allowed to see the downfall of the wicked. The opinion that holds that the light was a precious stone is also of the opinion that the verse is limiting the praise of Noach; therefore, it was not appropriate for him to see the wicked perish. This is similar to what we find regarding the destruction of Sodom, where Lot was commanded not to look behind him as he escaped. Since he was saved only because of the merit of Avraham, it was inappropriate that he witness the destruction of others. In like manner, it was forbidden for Noach to see the downfall of the wicked, which is why he needed a precious stone to provide light.

### Attention All Kabbalists

“In the year six hundred of Noach’s life...the fountains of the great deep erupted and the windows of Heaven opened” (*Bereishis* 7:11). The Kotzker Rebbe cites the *Zohar*, which says that this verse alludes to the six hundredth year of the sixth millennium (5600), which is 1840. Just like during the flood, the physical windows of Heaven opened, so too, in 1840 there was a great increase in human knowledge and scientific discoveries. The industrial revolution began changing people’s lives forever. In particular the steam engine was invented, which would change the world, opening it up to trade and travel. These events were already alluded to in the Torah thousands of years ago.

At the end of the *parashah*, during the story of the Tower of Babel, the Torah describes members of that generation’s conversation: “Come, let us make bricks and burn them in fire. And the brick served them as stone, and the lime served them as mortar” (*Bereishis* 11:3). Rashi tells us that since it was a valley and there were no stones, they made bricks instead. The next verse continues, “Come, let us build a city, and a tower...and let us make a name for ourselves.” What is the significance of this sequence of events, that we are specifically told that first they made bricks, and then a tower with which to challenge G-d? Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld explains that the generation was obsessed with innovation and technology. Not having stone to build with didn’t stop them; instead, someone invented bricks. The natural response to such discoveries is to think precisely as the Torah predicts: “My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth” (*Devarim* 8:17). Then one can go so far as to challenge Hashem. That is the lesson of this episode: the generation became so engrossed in their own technology that they forget their reliance on G-d. So too, we live in the most technologically advanced age; there is no end to the new discoveries and theories of science. Yet, every so often events occur that remind us of our limitations. The lesson from the *parashah* is that perhaps we are not as advanced as we would like to think.