

PARSHAS NOACH – MR MICHAEL LEBRETT

Rashi observes that there are two conflicting opinions concerning Noach's righteousness. Some maintain that since he was capable of being a Tzadik in his immensely wicked and corrupt generation, he would certainly have become an even greater Tzadik had he lived in a generation more conducive to righteousness. Others contend that the title Tzadik was only relative to his spiritually and morally rotten generation. Had he lived at the time of Avrohom Ovinu, he would have been considered as nothing.

Why was the generation of Avrohom specifically chosen to be the glaring contrast to Noach's generation, and thus evoking the derisory comment that amongst them 'he would have been considered as nothing'? Why not compare Noach's stature now, to the future generation of Moshe, Dovid or Shlomo?

R' Shlomo Ganzfried – author of the Kitzur Shulchon Oruch – suggests the following idea. In every generation there is a responsibility resting on the shoulders of the Tzadikim to guide their generation along the correct spiritual path and admonish the people when necessary. Yet, there may be a reluctance on the part of the Tzadik to do so. The reason for this, is that people will attempt to denigrate him by finding fault in his personality, or try to find a flaw in his behaviour or performance of mitzvos. They may contrive to discover a skeleton in the cupboard. They do this, so that they can offer the retort 'who are you to tell us what to do !'. Inevitably, some accusations – whether true or not – will stick, and his name and reputation will be tarnished. As a result, the Tzadik may prefer to remain silent, avoid abuse and just leave them to their fate. At least there would be no personal criticism and his standing and good name would remain. This in fact was the modus vivendi of Noach. He was a 'Tzadik', but also 'Tomim' – perfect in the eyes of his fellow man. He was able to safeguard his reputation by avoiding confrontation.

The Ksav Sofer offers a different explanation concerning Noach's attitude to his generation. He notes that in the first posuk (Noach 6:9) of the sedra, Noach is called a 'Tzadik Tomim'. However, shortly afterwards (Noach 7:1) Hashem only calls him 'Tzadik'. The Ksav Sofer explains that in fact Noach spent years reproaching his fellow man. For his efforts he was rewarded with the title 'Tzadik Tomim' – the perfect, quintessential Tzadik. However, the Torah then tells us (Noach 6:10) that Noach became the father of three sons. From then on, Noach's approach changed dramatically. He no longer took an interest in the sinners of his generation. The Ksav Sofer suggests that from the moment his son's were born he was only interested in protecting them from the adverse influences outside. He protected and shielded them – and himself – from his generation. The spiritual slide that was gathering momentum beyond his four walls did not deter Noach from this total dedication to his sons future nor did it persuade him to attempt to persuade his generation to repent. The generation disintegrated rapidly (Noach 6:11-12), till the point when there was no salvation and they had to be wiped out (Noach 6:13). This explains the sequence of the first five pesukim of Parshas Noach. It also explains why he was robbed of the title 'Tomim'.

These explanations of Noach's attitude to his generation, suggest that he was very determined to preserve his and his family's spiritual standing at all cost. His failure in not being able to persuade anybody outside his immediate family to believe in Hashem or repent is testimony to his less than rigorous approach to kiruv work. R' Shimon Schwab suggests that this is why Noach would have been considered nothing, specifically in Avrohom's generation. The theme of Avrohom and his generation was chesed in all its forms. Real chesed includes extending the hand of kindness to those far removed from Torah observance and influencing them to abandon their ways. Rashi (Lech Lecho 12:5) mentions the success that Avrohom and Soroh had in bringing people close to Hashem. Hence, in a generation exemplified by spiritual chesed, Noach indeed would have been considered as nothing.

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