

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

NO'ACH 5785

Biblical commentators have each sought to understand what appears to be a very ambivalent, even clashing, portrayal of No'ach. Was he a tzadik and innocent (6:9), or a drunken man of the earth (9:20-21)? Did he find favor in the eyes of HaShem (6:8), or were the Flood waters called by his name - MEI NO'ACH - because he refrained from praying for his generation (Zohar 1:67b)? In a word, who was the real No'ach? Was he really a man of extraordinary stature and wholesome character, or simply the best choice under the circumstances, but deeply flawed nevertheless?

A possible answer may be found in the following Midrash (Tanchuma No'ach 5): "'These are the generations of No'ach. No'ach was a righteous man ... No'ach walked with God' (6:9). Why is No'ach's name repeated three times in this single verse? Because he was one of the three men privileged to experience three changes that occurred in the world. The three were No'ach, Daniel, and Iyov. No'ach saw the world inhabited, he witnessed its destruction, and finally he beheld it reinhabited." Chazal appear to be indicating that No'ach experienced three distinct periods in his life, each

quite dissimilar and requiring a different set of skills to cope with the unique challenges of each.

In the first stage, No'ach is confronted by a generation whose hedonistic impulses ran amuck, dragging its denizens down to a life of depravity and wickedness. No'ach's response was to insulate himself from this corruption lest he succumb as well. He heroically resists and heeds Gd's command to construct the Ark (Zohar 1:58). No'ach indeed is a tzadik and tamim, and deservedly so as HaShem attests to again (7:1). True, in his isolated state, he understandably neglects to pray for the salvation of his generation. An unfortunate mistake, declare Chazal, but No'ach still finds favor in the eyes of HaShem.

In the second stage, No'ach witnesses the utter destruction of all living things. Gd commands him to enter the Ark, and yet Chazal comment that No'ach refused to enter the Ark until the waters compelled him to do so (Tanchuma No'ach 6). Why? Answers the Midrash, "No'ach was one of little faith; he believed, yet he did not believe the Flood would come." But the devastation did come and No'ach had to deal with this grisly and horrific reality. And additionally, life in the Ark presented its own ordeals and hardships. As the Midrash graphically depicts (Sanhedrin 108b,

B'reishit Rabba 31:14), for an entire year, No'ach had no choice but to deal with the indignities of feeding and caring for all the creatures aboard. Normal family life was nil, sleep - hardly any, and all the while, No'ach being ever cognizant of the catastrophic tragedy unfolding outside. Was No'ach successful in dealing with this new set of circumstances? Yes and no. Some animals were neglected with injurious consequences, but No'ach and his family endured and survived.

And then, the final period. No'ach is commanded to leave the Ark (8:17). Commanded? Apparently, there was some reluctance to go out (B'reishit Rabba 34:8). And justifiably so. Imagine the scene that greeted them. Utter desolation and destruction, nothing idyllic or comforting, just total, austere, harsh barrenness. And now, No'ach is confronted with his most demanding test of all. Can he rebuild a new world? His response: he plants a vineyard and becomes inebriated with embarrassing and humiliating consequences (9:20-21). As the Midrash puts in (B'reishit Rabba 36:3), "No'ach made himself profane, for he should have first engaged in a different sort of planting." Can we understand No'ach's crushing frame of mind upon leaving the Ark?! "If I had only done this or that: outreached more courageously, prayed properly - a bit

more earnestly..., but I didn't!" And yet, clearly, No'ach recovers and he and his family recreate the world. Mankind is saved and reborn, and the covenant of the rainbow promises that never again would there be such a disastrous flood-water calamity.

What then are we to make of No'ach? True, he was no Avraham, nor a Moshe, but perhaps we can say - in fact, it would be wholly appropriate to assert - that No'ach was - and is - "everyman?!" Indeed, each of us is much like No'ach; we, who may not rank among the great pious and righteous people in our history, but as a "No'ach", yes, we would certainly qualify!

If Gd blesses us with many years, most of us - much like No'ach - also pass through different stages. And as we navigate through these periods, they each present their own unique challenges and tests requiring a different skill-set to effectively deal with their new realities. Are we always completely successful in meeting these challenges? Probably not. But if not "always completely", we do succeed somewhat. There are significant accomplishments, worthwhile achievements, even if in the process we blunder and make mistakes.

In our younger years, we face issues of career choice, family dynamics and tensions and the many frustrations of

simply growing up. And then, once we marry, we find ourselves confronted with a whole host of other challenges: the stresses of job satisfaction, children rearing, and broader community problems and stresses. And then, when finally, we reach our senior years, there are health issues, the boredom of retirement and the sometimes-bleak realization of opportunities squandered and opportunities frittered away. In all of these encounters, through the many doubts and struggles, we try hard to be on the winning side of each challenge. Sometimes, we are, and sometimes, we fail miserably. But, if, in the end, when all was said and done, we can at least say we were a "No'ach" who found favor in the eyes of our Maker, then our life will have been worthwhile and meaningful, and our legacy, one to be proud of.

At his public address in October of 1964, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, sought to explain why many of our Sages spoke disparagingly of No'ach. The Rebbe argued that not only were the Rabbis not trying to minimize No'ach's virtues, but, in fact, they actually wanted to highlight his praises even more. Equally important, they were trying to teach us all a transformative lesson; for by degrading No'ach and stating that in other generations No'ach would be eclipsed, Chazal turned him into a

most inspiring figure, someone who could serve as a model for all of us simple men and women - everyman.

The message of No'ach would thus be life-changing; for one would not need to be an Avraham or Moshe to transform the world. True, in the presence of these great moral giants, No'ach might be overshadowed. Indeed, standing near Avraham, No'ach would appear insignificant. But that is exactly what made him so significant! He set a standard for those of us who appear in our own eyes as insignificant.

The message then is clear. Should we strive to be an Avraham or Moshe? Certainly! To emulate their attributes, for sure. But, more realistically, our model ought to be No'ach. To be a simple man or woman who, true to our sacred heritage, can, in our own way, stand up to lies, greed, and promiscuity, and become a beacon of light and hope. Each of us can construct an ark where others can find shelter from a flood of pain and insanity and thus make a real difference in their lives. We must stop giving ourselves the excuse that we are just ordinary people with little to contribute. All of us can be a No'ach!

"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the

something that I can do." (Edward
Everett Hale)

"And No'ach found favor in the eyes
of HaShem!" 🙌