

Noach, Avraham and Lot: Acting Out Tzedaka

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A comparison of passive, "neutral" Noah, active Avraham, and how Lot acted too. The hospitality of Avraham as an example which Lot copied. A lesson for all the mitzvot.

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1. Three righteous men in these parshiyot, Noah, Avraham, and even Lot. What is the difference between them? What message can we learn from the differences?

2. The Torah testifies Noah is an ish tzadik tamim haya bedorotav. Yet he remains an elusive personality. Little is known about the nature of his goodness. The Torah's qualification, "in his generation", seems to change the quality of the compliment. The implication seems to be that in a corrupt generation, Noah stood head and shoulders above all others. However, it is possible that in another generation he would not have been so noticeable. Rashi points this out giving both opinions; that he overcame the wickedness of his generation, but on the other hand he never attained Avraham's greatness.

3. For, consider Noah's generation: "And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of the rulers saw the daughters of men that they were beautiful. And they took as wives all those whom they chose. . . . The earth also was corrupt before G-d, and the earth was filled with violence. And G-d looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth. And G-d said to Noah, 'The end of all flesh has come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.' [Genesis 6:1-2, 11-12] Clearly, in that generation all moral boundaries had broken down. In fact, the very fabric of society had become corroded. It is in this context that we see Noah's goodness. Noah did not partake of the licentiousness and thievery of his generation. Noah did no evil. That alone could make him a tzaddik.

4. However, the Torah doesn't mention any of his good deeds either. To a certain extent there is almost a sense of "neutrality" about Noah: not hurting others, but also seemingly not helping them. Thus we see his greatness side by side with his tragedy.

5. The Zohar, highlights this dimension of Noah. In the less well-known segment called Hashmatot HaZohar, [Bereishit 254b], we find a dialogue between Noah and G-d, which takes place after the flood.

"When Noah came out of the Ark and saw the world destroyed, he began to cry before G-d and he said, 'Master of the universe, You are called compassionate. You should have been compassionate for Your creation'. G-d responded and said, 'You are a foolish shepherd. Now you say this?! Why did you not say this at the time I told you that I saw that you were righteous among your generation, or afterward when I said that I will bring a flood upon the people, or afterward when I commanded you to build an ark? I constantly delayed and I said, 'When is he

going to ask for compassion for the world?’ And now that the world is destroyed, you open your mouth, to cry in front of me, and to ask for supplication?’”

5. Reb Sholom Shewadron, z”l, noted that Noah was occupied with the building of the Ark for 120 years, while Avraham was a “mere” 75 years old when he came to the Promised Land, with Sarai, Lot and “Kol hanefesh asher asu beCharan” “with all the souls that they had ‘acquired’ in Haran”. “How is it”, Reb Sholom asked, “that Noah in 120 years did not convince even one additional person to join him in the Ark, while Avraham, in less than half that time, inspired a whole multitude of people to join with him in a voyage of discovery to G-d’s Promised Land?” To which he pithily answered in Yiddish, in his inimitable manner: “Avrohom hot gegeben zu essen, Noach hot gegeben -- musser” – “Avraham gave the people food while Noah gave them moralizing lectures.” Reb Sholom z”l supported this interpretation by noting that Noah was indeed punished for this lack of hospitality, and that for a period of twelve months – similar to the maximum amount of time a soul has to spend in Gehenom he had to feed an Ark full of animals. “Ven men gibt nicht die menshen zu essen - dan muss men die chayas geben essen”. “If one will not feed people, then one will have to feed the animals”.

6. Powerful words with a very clear message. To which I would like to add a further support from the parsha that follows: Even before Avraham attempts to intervene on behalf of the doomed cities of Sodom, G-d sends a special Angel to save the nephew Lot, and any members of his family who are willing to flee with him. One can legitimately ask why Lot was to be spared, after all he had chosen to move to Sodom and become one of the inhabitants of that sinful city. I would like to suggest that what saved him was the mitzva of hachnasat orchim -- hospitality to the guest and the stranger. True, Lot chose to live in Sodom, despite its corruption -- however, even there he remained true to the imperative that he had learned in Avraham’s home. Eshel Avraham -- Avraham offered every stranger who came by “eshel” -- achila, food, shtiya, drink, and lina, a place to sleep. And so, even in Sodom, his nephew Lot copied this attribute of hospitality and in fact was willing to sacrifice much for it. That is what saved Lot from the fate that befell the rest of that city.

7. Next week we read Hashem’s expectations from man in this regard. The verse (Ch. 18, v. 19) says: “Ki yedativ lemaan asher yetzave et banav veet beto acharav veshamru derech Hashem laasot tzedaka umishpat”, “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him - to do zedaka and mishpat. I find it significant that of the three heroes, if we may call them that, only Noah is referred to by the Torah as a tzaddik. For Avraham, I submit, that is not enough. Evidently one can be a tzaddik and still be passive. From Avraham and his descendants, more is expected. We are called upon “laasot tzedaka” -- to ACT OUT our tzedaka. This is our role. This is our destiny. We should not try and avoid this challenge, lest, as Reb Sholom z”l said: “Venn men gibt nicht die menshen zu essen - dan muss men die chayas geben essen” “If one will not feed people, then one will have to feed the animals”.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)