

Noach and Avraham

- Nisson Shulman.

The Hard struggle for our precious Israel. Through sacrifice the world can change. Comparison of Noach and Avraham. Avraham's protest at the promise of circumcision, fearing that it might separate him from mankind. Noah the universal man cares for himself, Avraham the first Jew cares for humanity! What it means to be the father of a multitude of nations.

NOACH (OR LECH LECHA): NOAH AND ABRAHAM

In all our current efforts on behalf of Israel, we seek to keep alive more than the Jewish State. We seek to enhance the sense of obligation, the debt we owe to those who have rendered immense sacrifice; a debt to the generations that have gone before, to the martyrs of our time, and to the heroes who through their toil, sweat and sacrifice of their blood and very lives, have brought about the formation of Israel, have kept it secure, and guard it still.

Now we are part of a global war against terrorism. For political reasons America has kept clear of identifying as terrorists those who have been seeking to terrorize Israel, but facts are facts and the facts are known full well. We must remember that all our patriotic fervor here is enhanced by our support of Israel, and especially trips to Israel, and particularly at this time. Missions keep happening. We should be part of them and we must keep making them happen.

"Israel", says our tradition, "is one of the most precious gifts God gives to our people. But because such gifts are so precious, they come only through suffering and tribulation". The trials heighten our appreciation of the goal. But the road towards that goal is hard. That must always be part of our Jewish awareness. We must be ready for hardship. And we must recognize the goals as worth the suffering; peace, security, freedom, and a united, thriving people, living with God's blessing and protection, as well as in the spirit of His word. The people striving towards those goals demonstrate their greatness in proportion to their willingness to sacrifice toward the achievement of those goals. And now we share those goals with the American people.

For it is in the nature and philosophy of our people, in fact the bedrock of our approach to life, that through such sacrifice the world can change. Bad can become good, war can change to peace, and sorrow can turn to gladness. "Hazorim bedima berina yiktzoru. Haloch yelech ubacho, nose meshech hazara. Bo yavo berina, nose alumotav." "Those who sow in tears will reap in joy. They who struggle onward weeping under the burden of planting, will surely come singing, bearing the sheaves of harvest."

This is clearly apparent in the Torah reading of these few weeks, which gives Rashi and other scholars the chance to compare Noah and Abraham. It is a favorite theme of our sages, because Noah repopulated the world, while Abraham started the Jewish people. In the comparison we find lessons for the Jew in his role as a human being, part of mankind's destiny, and in his role as a Jew facing his own destiny.

Noah suffers by comparison. His three children are born without trouble, and early in his life. He

is commanded to build an Ark, and does so without demur, though it is only big enough for his family and the animals he is commanded to include. He never protests the flood to come. He builds the Ark at God's command, enters it at God's command, and offers no objection or response to that command.

In contrast, we are taught that Abraham was concerned for humanity at large. His tent was open on four sides to welcome traveler whichever way they would come. He was, by reputation and by God's promise, an AV HAMON GOYIM, a "father of multitudes of nations". He cared for all his neighbors, even pleading that God spare the wicked Sodomites. He was childless till old, and pleaded for a child only after he had done all he could for all people. Even the covenant of circumcision, we are told in the Midrash, did not please him, for he was afraid it would separate him from other people, and make him exclusive, a "chosen people". The Rav zt"l, interpreted a Midrash explaining the Torah's words, Vayipol Avraham al panav as follows: Amar Avraham, ad achshav hayu ovrim veshavim baim etzli, tomar achshav mishemalti, ein ovrim veshavim baim etzli? Avraham protested when he fell on his face. He said, "O Lord, by becoming a 'chosen people' will people stop coming to me? Does being a chosen people mean that we must forget about the rest of humanity, and like the people of Sodom, think we are a master race and build a wall to separate us from human destiny?"

And the Almighty comforted Avraham with the promise Av hamon goyim netaticha. "No, Abraham, that is not what I meant. You will continue to be an Av hamon goyim. You will be the spiritual father of a multitude of nations; you will continue to care for all people. You are chosen to be an example to others, not to shut them out."

Isn't that a paradox? Noah represents universal man. He is the father of all humanity. Yet he is the one who cares only for himself and his own! Abraham the first Jew cares for the world before himself! Shouldn't it be the opposite?

No, it should not. The Torah is giving us examples of two approaches to life; two philosophies. And our Rabbis, by comparing them, require us to choose Abraham's way.

The name Noach in Hebrew means "Easy-going". It is significant. It represents a fatalistic approach to the world. "You can't fight fate!" Nature is overwhelming. It is too strong for us. If a flood comes, the best we can do is try to escape it ourselves. Noah, the easy-going, is ready to comply with any situation, conform to any condition.

Abraham, on the other hand, is a spiritual revolutionary. He feels that he can and must change the world. Because he knows that the world can be changed! In fact circumcision symbolizes this. The human being is not perfect, but must perfect himself, just as the world is not perfect, and must be perfected by the human being. Heal. Cure. Transplant. Your spirit isn't perfect either. People have "uncircumcised hearts". Change them. You can, through repentance. That is what the Day of Atonement is all about. Society isn't perfect either. Make it so.

What does it mean to be the "father of a multitude of nations"? It means, teach this lesson; that it is a good world, particularly because you have the capacity to make it better! That is Abraham's lesson which he taught many people.

Those people who think nothing can be done about poverty, famine or disease; those who make peace with the presence of oppression on this earth; the professors and some students on campus and some small number of others whose panic in the face of threats of terror impels them to urge negotiating with the Tallaban, all make peace with the philosophy of Noah, the universal man who cared so little for others, but was in fact altogether parochial.

Those who seek to change all this: who have faith in man's potential and in the world's potential, and will not lose hope even before impossible odds, are living and teaching Abraham's lesson. Those Jews who over the centuries have actually changed the world by refusing to accept defeat in spite of all the odds, despite staggering sacrifice and enormous loss, represent, not only the Jews, but Judaism as well; not only the people of Israel today, but the philosophy of a people and its approach to life that has given it and the world renewed life from Abraham's time till today.

(The next paragraph appears in a previous sermon, but I repeat it because it is appropriate to the thought and to save you the trouble of looking through the archives if you have not yet used it or want to repeat it.)

A Roman tyrant once asked Rabbi Akiva: "If your God wanted man to be circumcised, why didn't He create him so? If God loves the poor, why doesn't He feed them?" Akiva answered that God wanted man to share in the work of creation, and in so doing become a "partner with God in creation". Thus, he wanted him to perfect himself through circumcision; to perfect society by feeding and clothing and housing the poor – because God particularly wanted man to share with Him in the wonderful work of creation.

The tyrant wanted the status quo. Of course, it was to his advantage. He ruled. He wanted society to remain half slave, half free, with slaves and plebeians and aristocrats. Akiva wanted a mighty striving for perfection. Status quo is wrong. Not what is, is good, but rather what might be, and therefore what ought to be. Like Abraham, Akiva wanted to change the world.

Of course, Jews do say, *Bashert*. But did you ever hear that world used before an effort? Only afterwards! When facing a challenge, we must not accept imperfection passively. After we have done all we could, then we accept God's will and say, "It is *bashert*".

So Noah, the universal man, represents a universal tendency to accept the world as it is; to submit to fate. Abraham, the Jew, represents a Jewish message to the world, not to submit but to change fate. This has been our characteristic from the time of Abraham and Sarah, and many have learned it from us.

That is the meaning of *EIN MAZAL LEYISRAEL*. The word "mazel" means constellation. The "Mazalot", astrology, fate, the stars in their courses, were thought by ancients, and even by many today, to influence the course of human events. Judaism says the stars are fine in their courses, but man has his course and he is the pilot of that course, not the unseen stars. His is the responsibility, the accountability, and the consequences!

That is the lesson of our people. That is the lesson of the small State of Israel, showing the world

what the human spirit can do. That is a lesson we must continue to support by supporting Israel as well as demonstrating it - in whatever way we can - to our American friends and neighbors. The lesson is not finished until peace will flow like a mighty river, and water the parched hearts and minds of all mankind.

Submitted by Nisson Shulman