**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NOACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Noach the story of Noach’s intoxication after he planted a vineyard and produced wine. In his drunken stupor, Noach undressed himself inside his tent, where he was seen by his son, Cham. The Torah tells that Cham shared the news of his father’s disgrace with his older brothers, Sheim and Yefet, who responded by respectfully covering Noach with a garment to protect him from further embarrassment. Noach later learned of what happened, and proceeded to pronounce a curse on Cham and to bless his other sons.

Rashi, commenting on this episode (9:22), cites two views mentioned by the Gemara, in Masekhet Sanhedrin (70a), regarding Cham’s misconduct. Whereas the Torah says simply that Cham saw his father in his disgraced state, these two Sages claimed that he committed a far greater offense: according to one view, Cham castrated Noach, and the other says that he raped him.

It could be suggested that these readings of the text reflect the two mistakes that we tend to make upon seeing people disgraced, when we see them fail and suffer humiliation. The first mistake is to “castrate” them in our minds, in the sense of viewing them as fruitless and irredeemably consigned to failure. When we learn of somebody’s grave mistake or wrongdoing, we might be naturally inclined to deny their future potential, and to believe that they are incapable of ever achieving or producing. Their failures or misdeeds, we might think, make them helplessly and hopelessly unsuccessful. This, perhaps, is the allegorical meaning of *Chazal*’s description of Cham “castrating” his father – that he viewed this unfortunate incident as the end of Noach’s life of productivity, feeling that Noach could never again achieve anything of significance after humiliating himself in this way.

The other mistaken response to other people’s shame is to abuse it for our own selfish purposes, to take advantage of their blunders to boost our own ego and sense of self-righteousness. When we see somebody humiliated, we might seek to draw satisfaction from his or her disgrace, feeling superior and successful in contrast to that person’s failure. Just as a rapist abuses the victim’s state of weakness and vulnerability for his own pleasure, we are sometimes tempted to abuse a disgraced person’s shame for our own gratification, priding ourselves over our perceived position of superiority.

The correct response to other people’s humiliation, of course, is that of Sheim and Yefet, who immediately proceeded to “cover their father’s nakedness” – to do what they could to protect Noach’s honor. Rather than view Noach as helplessly condemned to failure and disgrace, or to feed their own egos off his shame, they chose to preserve his dignity. They recognized the importance of maintaining respect for people even after they have failed, even in their state of disgrace. They realized that all people have “nakedness,” embarrassing aspects of their characters and their past, and all people deserve the right to have these aspects kept concealed. We learn from this story the importance of respecting people for their admirable qualities even after their “nakedness” has been exposed, even upon discovering their mistakes and failings, rather than condemning them to eternal shame or utilizing their humiliation to bolster our own feelings of pride.

Sunday

Rashi, commenting on the opening verse of Parashat Noach, famously cites two views among *Chazal* (Sanhedrin 108a) regarding the Torah’s description of Noach as a righteous person “*be-dorotav*” (“in his generations”). One view explains this term as expressing special praise for Noach’s ability to live righteously in a generation characterized by depravity, indicating that had he lived among pious people, he would have achieved even greater heights of righteousness. According to the other view, however, the Torah added this word to moderate its praise of Noach, indicating that he was considered righteous only in comparison to his contemporaries, whereas in other generations, he would not have been deemed especially pious.

Many writers found this second view surprising. The Torah speaks glowingly of Noach’s piety, on account of which God decided to spare mankind despite the widespread sin and corruption. Why, these writers wondered, would some Sages interpret the word “*be-dorotav*” as qualifying Noach’s praise, rather than magnifying it?

This question led some writers to offer creative readings of this view cited by Rashi. One such drastic suggestion was proposed by Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apta, in his *Oheiv Yisrael*, where he explains that this view refers to Noach’s own perception of himself. According to this view, the Torah does not intend to mitigate its praise of Noach, but rather to teach that Noach himself humbly acknowledged that he was considered pious only in relation to his contemporaries. Rather than pride himself over his righteous stature, he recognized that he had far more to achieve, and that his moral superiority over the evildoers of his time did not absolve him of the need to reach higher. And thus when Rashi cites the “*dorshin li-gnai*” – those who interpreted the word “*be-dorotav*” in a manner which is unflattering to Noach – this refers to Noach’s own mindset, the way he saw himself and assessed his accomplishments.

While it is difficult to accept this reading as the actual intent of *Chazal*, nevertheless, this insight of the Rebbe of Apta offers us an important lesson regarding our ambitions and aspirations. It instructs that we must not set our expectations of ourselves based on what we see people around us doing, on the standards of contemporary society or even of our narrow peer group, but rather based on our potential and capabilities. Our feelings of pride over our achievements and standards must not lead us to complacency or arrogance, and to lazily squander our potential to accomplish more. It is certainly legitimate, and important, to be “*dorshin li-shvach*,” to feel proud of what we’ve achieved, but only if we are also “*dorshin li-gnai*” – fully cognizant of the fact that we are capable of achieving even more, and committed to making an effort to do so.

Monday

We read in Parashat Noach of Noach’s decision after the flood ended to send a raven from the ark to see whether the waters had subsided to the point where the earth was again inhabitable. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 33:5) tells that the raven protested its designation for this assignment. While the Midrash here does not specify the raven’s arguments, it likely refers to the Gemara’s account in Masekhet Sanhedrin (108b), where the raven is said to have argued that Noach should have chosen for this dangerous mission one of the kosher birds which he had brought with him onto the ark. After all, Noach brought seven of each species of kosher birds, but just two – a male and a female – of the other species. The raven thus argued that it might be killed by the harsh elements, in which case its species would be extinct. It would have been far more reasonable for Noach to send one of the kosher species, which would not become extinct if the designated bird does not return alive.

The Midrash continues that Noach retorted, “What does the world need you for – neither for eating nor for a sacrifice!” In other words, Noach sent the raven because he figured the loss of this species would have no impact upon the earth. The raven offers no benefit for mankind, and thus this species could just as well become extinct.

In response to Noach’s expression of disregard for the raven, the Gemara proceeds to relate, God told Noach that there would come a time when the world would desperately need the raven’s help. Many centuries later, the prophet Eliyahu pronounced that a severe drought would strike the Land of Israel, and no rain fell for several years. As we read in Sefer Melakhim I (17:6), Eliyahu was fed during this period by a group of ravens which miraculously supplied him with food. Noach was irresponsible and short-sighted in dismissing the raven as a superfluous species, for in truth, in the future it would fill the vital role of sustaining the prophet who opposed the widespread idol-worship in the Kingdom of Israel.

*Chazal* here convey the message stated succinctly in *Pirkei Avot* (4:3), “Do not belittle any person…for there is no person who does not have a moment.” We are to firmly believe that every human being has talents, potential and a role for which he or she came into this world. It is wrong to say or think about any person, “What does the world need your for?” Even if we currently cannot identify any positive attributes or potential contributions which a person is capable of making, we must trust that “there is no person who does not have a moment,” that the time will come, perhaps only many years in the future, when he or she will fill a significant role. *Chazal* here challenge us to see the goodness, beauty and wealth of potential within each and every person, and firmly believe in the “moment,” or perhaps many “moments,” that every individual will have to make his or her meaningful contribution to mankind.

Tuesday

The Midrash (*Kohelet Rabba* 10) finds it significant that Noach did not enter the ark to escape from the flood until God instructed him to do so (7:1), and did not exit the ark after the flood until God instructed him to do so (8:16): “He entered the ark with permission, and left with permission.”

Commenting on the significance of Noach’s leaving the ark only with God’s permission, Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg writes in his *Yalkut Yehuda* that Noach could not leave the ark before receiving God’s authorization because his sojourn in the ark served as a means of atonement. Elsewhere (*Bereishit Rabba* 31), the Midrash comments that the ark “purified” Noach, comparing the ark to the process of purification that a *metzora* must undergo before he can return to his city. This comparison clearly indicates that Noach, while having resisted the sinful influences of his contemporaries, was nevertheless guilty of certain misdeeds for which he required atonement, just as a *metzora*’s condition – as understood by *Chazal* – resulted from certain transgressions. The grueling experience of living in the ark with the world’s animals, the Midrash teaches, was Noach’s means of attaining atonement so he could be worthy of being saved from the flood. Accordingly, Rav Ginsburg writes, Noach had to endure the cramped, harsh conditions of the ark even after the floodwaters subsided until God determined that his process of atonement had been completed. For this reason, he waited until God’s explicit command to exit the ark before leaving, as only God could determine when he had satisfactorily completed his atonement process.

Extending this notion further, we might suggest that Noach waited to enter the ark for the same reason. Although he may have been eager to achieve atonement, he was not entitled to begin this process before the time God determined this was to occur. Just as Noach could not complete his atonement process before receiving God’s instruction, he likewise could not begin his atonement process before receiving God’s instruction.

If so, then the Midrash emphasizes that we are not entitled to determine on our own the proper way to attain closeness to the Almighty. No matter how sincere we might be in our desire to draw close to God and to serve Him, we must “wait” to receive His command; we need to follow His guidance and instructions for how to serve Him, as conveyed to us through our Torah tradition. Just as Noach could not decide on his own when and how to experience the “purification” provided by the ark, similarly, we must not try to decide on our own how to achieve purification, sanctity, and closeness with our Creator, and must instead faithfully abide by His commands and the dictates of the halakhic system.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Noach tells the story of *Migdal Bavel* – the city and tower which the people of the time built, for which God punished them by having them speak different languages and dispersing them. One of the approaches taken to explain this ambiguous story appears in the Gemara, in Masekhet Sanhedrin (109a), where it is suggested that this story actually involved three different groups. One group planned simply to reside in the city and tower, a second intended to use the tower as a site of idolatrous worship, and a third saw the tower as a means of ascending to the heavens to wage war against God. The Gemara proceeds to infer from the narrative that the different factions were punished in different ways. The third faction, we are told, were punished for their desire to “fight” against God by being turned into various forms of wild beasts and evil spirits.

How might we explain this peculiar punishment brought upon those who wanted to wage war against God? Why was this chosen as the appropriate fate for these people who foolishly thought they could wage a successful battle against the world’s Creator?

One possibility is that the Gemara here speaks in allegorical terms of those who “wage war” against God in the sense of rejecting religious belief on the grounds that religion is detrimental to mankind and to the world. The Gemara here uses the story of *Migdal Bavel* as a metaphor for people who see themselves as courageous warriors defending humanity from the harmful effects of religion. Their message is that the belief in a Creator who demands worship and subservience poses danger to the world and exacts a heavy toll from which they seek to save mankind. This is the “battle” that *Chazal* describe the third group of builders as waging. The Gemara teaches us that these “warriors” are mistaken, for in truth, it is Godlessness that poses danger and causes harm. Sincere belief in a God who has high demands and expectations of His creatures, and holds them accountable for their conduct, leads to the sort of restraint, discipline and self-control that people need to exercise in order to live peacefully and meaningfully. Although the war against faith might be presented as a war to defend humanity, it is, in truth, harmful for humanity, as genuine and proper religious commitment results in greater morality, sensitivity and kindness among the people of the world.

(See Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg’s [*Yalkut Yehuda*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2810&st=&pgnum=114&hilite=), p. 114)

Thursday

One of God’s instructions to Noach regarding the construction of the ark was that it was to be built with “*kinim*” (6:14), which is generally understood as a reference to separate compartments, or different levels. Rashi, for example, writes that each species of animal was to reside in a separate area of the ark, thus necessitating a large number of distinct compartments.

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba*, 31), however, sees in the word “*kinim*” an allusion to the pair of birds (“*kein*”) which was required as part of the purification process of a *metzora*. Somebody who was determined to have been stricken with a *tzara’at* skin discoloration would live outside his city until he underwent an involved process to regain his status of purity, a process which included a ritual involving two birds (Vayikra 14). By using the word “*kinim*,” the Midrash comments, God was alluding to Noach that the ark would serve as a means of purification for him, much as the pair of birds provided purification for a *metzora*. In the Midrash’s words, “Just as this pair of birds purifies the *metzora*, your ark will similarly purify you.”

How might we explain the association drawn by the Midrash between Noach’s “purification” and the purification process required of a *metzora*?

Numerous sources indicate that while Noach was a righteous man who courageously resisted the tide of corruption and violence that defined his generation, he failed by withdrawing from his contemporaries, rather than working to influence them. His experience in the ark, in a certain sense, metaphorically represents his life before the flood, when he lived in isolation from the people of his time, preferring to simply separate himself from the sinful society, instead of making an effort to improve it. Noach thus required “purification” from the sin of isolation and withdrawal, his having pulled away from his contemporaries rather than engaging in society and endeavoring to exert a positive influence.

*Tzara’at* is commonly understood as a punishment for a variety of interpersonal offenses, particularly, indulging in gossip and talebearing. The *metzora* is seen as a person who involves himself too intensely in people’s affairs, who makes a point of finding out what everybody is doing – especially what they do wrong – and then disseminating that information. The *metzora* is punished by being banished from society, as he has proven himself incapable of appropriate social engagement, of setting proper limits on the extent of his involvement in people’s lives.

In effect, then, Noach and the *metzora* represent polar opposite models of social conduct. Noach represents the model of withdrawal and isolation, whereas the *metzora* represents the model of overinvolvement and inappropriate meddling.

By associating Noach with the *metzora*, the Midrash perhaps seeks to draw our attention to the stark difference between them, and to thereby teach us of the delicate balance that must be maintained in our social involvement. We are to avoid both the model of Noach and the model of the *metzora* – the model of withdrawal and dissociation, and the model of prying and gossip. We must see ourselves as part of, and thus responsible for, our community and society, but within reasonable limits, respecting the privacy and dignity of other people. The Midrash teaches us to recognize the line between meaningful social engagement and invasion of privacy, to engage with other people without overstepping our bounds and intruding upon their personal affairs.

Friday

The Midrash (*Pesikta Rabbati*, 9) makes the following comment regarding the flood which God brought during the time of Noach to destroy the earth:

The Almighty said: “When I triumph, I lose, and when I am defeated, I benefit. I defeated the generation of the flood – is it not I who lost, as I destroyed My world… But during the time of Moshe, when I was defeated, I received benefit, as I did not annihilate the Israelites…”

In Noach’s time, God “triumphed” in that He carried out His decree of annihilation, yet He ended up “losing,” in that He destroyed His world. In the time of Moshe, however, when God decreed annihilation upon *Benei Yisrael*, Moshe interceded on the nation’s behalf, and God was “defeated” and rescinded the decree. He thus ended up “benefitting,” as it were, in that His beloved nation survived.

The Midrash explains on this basis the verse in Yeshayahu (57:16), “For not forever will I fight, and not for eternity will I be enraged…” This verse, the Midrash asserts, should be read as, “I will not fight to triumph.” (The Midrash suggests reading the word “*la-netzach*” – “for eternity” – as “*le-nitzu’ach*” – “to triumph.”) God here proclaims that He much prefers being defeated, as it were, by compassionately forgiving wrongdoing and allowing His beloved nation to endure, over “triumphing” by treating them harshly and punishing them for their misdeeds.

It would appear that the Midrash seeks to convey the vitally important lesson that very often, victory is actually defeat. When we insist on “fighting,” on proving our position correct and defeating the other party, we may very well end up losing. When we find ourselves embroiled in an argument with a family member, friend or neighbor, persisting and winning the fight results in the loss of the relationship – much as God’s strict treatment of *Benei Yisrael* would have resulted in the loss of His special nation. *Chazal* here remind us that very often, losing is the far better option, that we sometimes gain much more by surrendering, forgiving and foregoing than we do by persisting and fighting. Of course, there are instances when one has no choice but to persist. God determined that the world needed to be destroyed and rebuilt anew in Noach’s time due to the irreparable state of evil that had prevailed, and He was prepared to “suffer” this “loss” for the long-term benefit of the earth and of mankind. Nevertheless, the Midrash takes note of the “loss” He incurred, so-to-speak, by this drastic measure. We must carefully determine when the benefits of an argument outweigh the losses, and recognize that very often – albeit not always – we gain more by desisting than we do by persisting.

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