**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NOACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Noach the disturbing story of Noach’s inebriation following the flood. The Torah tells that Noach planted a vineyard, grew grapes, and produced wine, from which he drank to the point of intoxication. In his drunken stupor, he undressed himself, and one of his sons – Cham – delighted in Noach’s disgrace, for which he was later cursed.

One question that arises in this story is why Noach became inebriated. Had he never drunk wine in the past, before the flood? Was he unaware of the intoxicating effects of wine?

*Sefat Emet* (*Likutim*, Parashat Noach) suggests a creative answer, attributing this unfortunate incident to the biological changes that had taken place as a result of the flood. He writes that “the generations and nature changed,” such that small quantities of wine which Noach had been accustomed to drinking now caused intoxication. Noach drank the same quantity of wine which he would normally drink before the flood – not realizing the physical changes that occurred and which lowered his level of alcohol tolerance.

The Tolna Rebbe commented that the *Sefat Emet*’s understanding of this incident has broader implications, teaching us of the need for awareness of the differences between different periods and different ages. Methods, techniques and practices that were effective in one generation may be “intoxicating” in other generations. The Tolna Rebbe gave the specific example of educational approaches, which need to be adapted to suit the particular characteristics and realities of every era. The educational techniques that were used in the past are not necessarily appropriate for present-day realities, and can, like Noach’s wine, do more harm than good. The Tolna Rebbe applied this lesson also to our individual lives, noting that conduct and practices which are suitable in one stage of life are inappropriate at other stages. We must avoid the tendency to conveniently stay the same, to blindly assume that what we’ve done in the past is what we should be doing now, and we must instead carefully determine the proper mode of conduct for our current circumstances, and make the necessary changes in our behavior when necessary.

Sunday

King Shlomo, in *Megilat Kohelet* (9:14-15), imagines a city besieged by a powerful king, and a “wise, wretched man” cunningly devises a strategy to enable himself and the rest of the townspeople to escape. And yet, “not a person remembered that wretched man.” Despite his wisdom which saved the entire town, he received no recognition because he was poor, unknown, and not socially connected.

The Midrash (*Midrash Zuta,* Kohelet, cited by *Torah Sheleima* to Bereishit 8:1) applies this parable to Noach. God, the King, prepared to annihilate the earth, and Noach, the wise man, urged his fellow “townspeople” – his contemporaries – to repent. Alas, the verse tells, “not a person remembered that wretched man” – which the Midrash explains to mean that nobody paid heed to Noach’s warnings. The Midrash continues that the Almighty proclaimed, “You did not remember him – but I will remember him.” And thus the verse states that after the flood, “God remembered Noach and all the beasts and animals that were with him on the ark, and God had a wind pass over the earth, and the water subsided” (8:1). Nobody paid attention to Noach – except God, who protected Noach and his family during the flood, and ended the flood so they could exit the ark and began their lives anew.

Very often, we use fame and prestige as the barometer with which to gauge people’s success and even worth, equating renown and popularity with achievement. The unfortunate result of this distorted perception is that many people focus their efforts on earning respect and recognition, instead of following their beliefs and convictions, and living the life which they think is best for them. Too many people spend their lives trying to win approval and recognition, rather than living according to their ideals, pursuing their ambitions, and maximizing their unique potential. The Midrash here teaches that we should not be concerned about whether or not we are “remembered” by other people – whether we are noticed, recognized and given respect – but rather about how God “remembers” us. What should matter to us is what the Almighty thinks of us, not what other people think of us. Noach was ridiculed and scorned by his contemporaries, but was lovingly “remembered” by God, who cherished Noach’s piety to the extent that He saved the earth and allowed human life to continue in Noach’s merit. We are assured that even if people do not know of, or respects, our efforts to act righteously, these efforts are highly regarded by God, which is all that truly matters.

Monday

We read in Parashat Noach that after Noach exited the ark following the flood, God promised to never again flood the earth, and He announced that the rainbow would serve as a sign of this eternal promise. He said, “The rainbow will appear in the cloud, and I shall see it, to remember the eternal covenant between God and all living beings…” (9:16).

One of the questions that arise concerning this verse is the notion that God will be “reminded” of the covenant by looking at the rainbow. Quite obviously, God does not need any reminders, and it thus seems strange that God will speak of Himself as being reminded by the sight of the rainbow that He had promised to never bring another flood to destroy the world. And besides, if He is the one placing the rainbow in the sky, then He of course does not need to see it to be reminded of His covenant.

The simplest explanation, perhaps, is that offered by the Radak (to 9:15), who applies here the principle of “*dibera Torah ki-lshon benei adam*” – the Torah speaks in human terms. Of course, God does not need to be reminded of anything, but the Torah here anthropomorphizes God, speaking of Him as though He is “reminded,” because “remembering” is something relatable to us humans based on our experience.

Rav Saadia Gaon avoids this problem by boldly reading the word “*u-r’itiha*” (“and I shall see it”) as “*ve-her’itiha*” – “I shall show it.” In his view, God said not that He would see the rainbow, but rather that He would show the rainbow to mankind, to remind them – and not Himself – of His eternal promise to never again flood the earth.

Another creative solution is offered by Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, where he demonstrates that the verb *r.a.h.*, which normally means “see,” can also mean “choose.” For example, when Avraham and Yitzchak were traveling to Mount Moriah where Avraham was commanded to sacrifice his son, he said to Yitzchak, “*Elokim* ***yir’eh*** *lo ha-seh le-ola*” – “God **will choose** for Himself the sheep for the offering” (Bereishit 22:8). And when Yosef suggested to Pharaoh that he appoint an official to oversee the storage of grain during the seven surplus years, he said, “*Ve-ata* ***yeireh*** *Pharaoh ish navon ve-chakham*” – “And now Pharaoh **shall choose** an intelligent, wise man” (Bereishit 41:33). Another example is the Torah’s command in Sefer Devarim (12:13) not to offer sacrifices outside the *Beit Ha-mikdash*: “*Hishamer lekha pen ta’aleh olotekha be-khol makom asher* ***tir’eh***” – “Be sure not to bring your offerings anywhere that **you choose**.” Here, too, Rav Mecklenberg suggests, God proclaimed that He has chosen the rainbow to serve as the reminder to the world of His eternal covenant to never again bring the flood. It is we, not God, who needs this reminder, and this verse speaks not of God seeing the rainbow to be reminded, but rather of His selecting the rainbow as the medium through which we are reminded of His promise.

Tuesday

Rashi, in his commentary to Parashat Noach (7:23), famously cites the Midrash’s account (in the *Midrash Tanchuma*) of Noach being bitten by the lion on the ark during the flood. Noach bore the responsibility of feeding all the animals with him on the ark, and on one occasion, he was late feeding the lion, and so the lion bit him.

The Midrash, as Rashi cites, seems to direct some criticism at Noach, applying to this incident the verse in Mishlei (11:31), “Behold, the righteous is repaid [for his wrongdoing] on the earth” – implying that the bite Noach suffered served as a punishment for his negligence. It appears that the Midrash found fault in Noach for arriving late on one occasion to feed the lion – despite Noach having to bear the near impossible task of feeding all the animals for the many months spent on the ark.

What might be the message conveyed by the Midrash’s description, and its criticism of Noach?

One answer that has been suggested is that feeding the lion was to be self-evidently Noach’s highest priority. As the strongest and fiercest animal, the lion should have been fed first, before the other animals. And thus the depiction of Noach delaying the feeding of the lion – presumably because that day he tended first to his other responsibilities – might perhaps represent the mistake of misplaced priorities, of neglecting the most important responsibilities in favor of less vital obligations. Often, we delay or entirely ignore our most important duties with the excuse that we are “busy,” preoccupied with other worthwhile pursuits. The Midrash’s depiction of Noach perhaps reminds us that we can be neglectful and irresponsible even if we are very busy, and even if we are very busy tending to important matters. We, like Noach, have many “animals” to tend to, numerous different important responsibilities that demand our attention. However, we must ensure to prioritize our time and energies properly, and ensure to first “feed” the “lion” – give precedence to our most vital responsibilities in life. We must follow Noach’s example of diligence and dedication, working devotedly and responsibly to satisfactorily meet the many different obligations assigned to us in our lives. But Noach’s lone mistake teaches us of the importance of prioritization, of ensuring that the plethora of such obligations does not distract us from the most central and vital responsibilities that we bear and which must be given precedence.

Wednesday

Among God’s instructions to Noach in preparation for the flood was to collect food with which to feed himself and the animals that he would bring with him onto the ark: “And you shall take for yourself from all kinds of food that are eaten, and collect it with you, and it shall be for consumption, for you and for them [the animals]” (6:21). The simple reading of this verse is that Noach was charged with the task of collecting all the various types of foods that would be necessary to feed all the various creatures on the ark.

Netziv, however, in his *Ha’ameik Davar*, explains this verse differently. He contends that to the contrary, God instructed Noach to collect only the kind of food that he (and his family) ate – assuring him that this food would miraculously suit also the animals on the ark. Netziv notes that God formulated his command to Noach with the expression “*kach lekha*” – “take for yourself,” which might suggest that Noach was to take only the kind of food that he ate. God then told him, “and it shall be for consumption, for you and them” – promising Noach that this human food would satisfy also the needs of the animals. One of miracles performed for Noach, according to Netziv, was that the animals on the ark were content with human food, a miracle which God performed in order to spare Noach the all but impossible task of collecting food for each and every different species on the ark.

This miracle may perhaps teach us the importance of flexibility, of being prepared to accept conditions to which we are unaccustomed. Often, we find ourselves rigidly bound to certain conditions, and feel incapable of managing with anything less or anything different. It might be certain types of food, a certain schedule, a certain environment, or certain material objects that we decide for ourselves that we cannot live without. The miracle described by Netziv perhaps shows us that we must be prepared, when necessary, to exercise flexibility. Just as the animals on the ark were able to subsist on human food throughout the period they spent on the ark, we should similarly be able to feel content even when circumstances change, when we face conditions with which we are unfamiliar and unaccustomed. We should never chain ourselves to any particular set of circumstances, and must instead be willing and ready to adapt and to feel satisfied with new conditions.

More specifically, we are to exercise flexibility especially when somebody else’s convenience is at stake – as in the case of Noach and the animals. God had the animals feel satisfied with human food in order to ease Noach’s burden – perhaps teaching us that we should never be strict and unyielding at somebody else’s expense. At times we need to be flexible and lower expectations in order to spare others inconvenience – just as the animals ate different food in order not to overburden Noach. This miracle should perhaps serve as a model of flexibility and sensitivity, teaching us that our preferences should never impose an unnecessary burden on somebody else’s shoulders.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Noach of God’s command to Noach to construct an ark in which he and representatives of every species of animal would find refuge from the flood which God would bring upon the earth. Many years later, after Noach complied with this command and completed the ark, just before the onset of the flood, God spoke to Noach again, instructing, “Go – you and all your household – into the ark, for I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation…” (7:1).

Malbim observes that whereas throughout the entire narrative of the flood the Torah refers to God with the Name “*Elokim*,” in this verse the Torah uses the Name of “*Havaya*.” The reason, Malbim suggests, lies in the different denotations of these two divine Names. “*Elokim*,” he explains, refers to God as the Creator, who maintains the natural order, in the capacity of which God wanted to the world to continue even after the flood that was necessary to eliminate all living creatures on earth. The Name of “*Havaya*,” by contrast, is associated with direct, personal providence, God’s protecting righteous individuals. Malbim explains that God rescued Noach both in the capacity of “*Elokim*,” in order to maintain the earth which He created, but also as “*Havaya*” – in order to reward Noach personally for his piety. Just before the flood, Malbim writes, God spoke to Noach with the Name “*Havaya*” and told him that he and his “household” may enter the ark – referring to his belongings. If God was rescuing Noach only as “*Elokim*,” to preserve the earth, Noach would not have had the right to spare his clothing, his riches, his utensils, and his cattle. And therefore, just before bringing the flood, God told Noach that he may bring his “household” onto the ark – referring to all the personal belongings that he wanted with him on the ark during the flood and wished to protect from the destruction. Since he was saved also by virtue of his piety, and not merely because of God’s desire to preserve humanity, he was permitted to bring his belongings with him.

This point is made by Netziv, as well, in his *Ha’ameik Davar* commentary to this verse. Later (8:7), Netziv adds that the birds which Noach sent from the ark after the flood to determine whether the earth was inhabitable were birds which he had kept as pets. After all, Netziv contends, it seems implausible that Noach would take the liberty to send out of the ark a creature which he was commanded to keep with him on the ark to preserve its species, until he received God’s authorization. The only explanation, Netziv writes, is that Noach had brought his pet birds with him onto the ark, and when he wanted to determine whether the floodwaters had subsided, he sent these birds out to see whether they would find dry land.

Returning to Netziv’s comments to the verse which speaks of Noach’s “household” going onto the ark, Netziv surprisingly asserts that Noach had servants whom he was permitted to bring with him onto the ark to protect them from the flood. According to Netziv, the permission granted to Noach to bring his “household” included not only his family and belongings, but also his hired helpers. Rav Shmuel Ha-kohen Rozovsky, writing in the journal *Kovetz Beit Aharon Ve-yisrael* (vol. 37, p. 119), strongly objects to this theory, noting numerous statements by *Chazal* to the effect that nobody but Noach and his family survived the flood (with the lone exception of Og, whom *Chazal* describe as having been saved by holding onto the ark), and all humankind after the flood descend from Noach. Interestingly enough, Rav Rozovsky goes so far as to insist that this theory was not advanced by Netziv himself, and this point was incorrectly added by a student during the preparation of Netziv’s posthumously published Torah commentary.

Friday

The Torah relates in Parashat Noach that after the flood, Noach sent a dove from the ark to determine whether the floodwaters had subsided to the point where there was dry, inhabitable land on earth. The dove could not find anywhere to land, and so it returned to the ark. A week later, Noach again sent the dove, and this time, it returned with the leaf of an olive branch, indicating to Noach that vegetation was again accessible (8:11).

Rashi cites the Gemara (Eiruvin 18b) as finding it significant that the dove brought specifically an olive, and explaining that the dove was saying to Noach, “Let my food be bitter like an olive through the Almighty’s hand, rather than sweet as honey through the hand of a human being.” The bitter olive brought from outside the ark sent the message to Noach that receiving “bitter” food from the hand of the Almighty is preferable to receiving “sweet” food from Noach, inside the ark.

The plain meaning of the Gemara’s statement, seemingly, is that one should prefer working to obtain his livelihood, relying on God’s help, rather than effortlessly living off the largesse of other people. The animals inside the ark represented those who are handed their livelihood without having to invest work or face the risks and pressures of finding sustenance outside the security of the “ark,” where they are cared for. The Gemara teaches that it is preferable to leave the “ark,” to face the challenges of earning a living on one’s own with faith in God’s ability and willingness to provide, even if the result is “bitter” as compared to the “sweetness” of free gifts.

Rav Yisrael of Modzhitz, however, in *Divrei Yisrael*, offers a different explanation. He suggests interpreting the term “*be-yado shel Ha-kadosh Barukh*” (“through the Almighty’s hand”) in the Gemara’s comment as referring to compliance with the Torah, which was given to us by God. And the term “*bi-ydei basar va-dam*” (“through the hands of a human being”), Rav Yisrael of Modzhitz writes, refers to exclusive focus on mundane endeavors. The Rebbe of Modzhitz explains that oftentimes, living and working in compliance with the Torah’s obligations and restrictions can result in a degree of “bitterness” – of compromise in one’s material standards. Leading a Torah life entails more than a few sacrifices of time and money. The Gemara here seeks to impress upon us that this “bitterness,” the sacrifices we are called upon to make for the sake of obeying the Torah’s laws, are far preferable to the “sweetness” – the comforts and vain pleasures that we could otherwise enjoy if we directed our lives exclusively to material gain and worldly pleasures. We should not hesitate to make the sacrifices necessitated by Torah observance, and should instead embrace and celebrate the privilege we have to live meaningful lives in the devoted service of our Creator, which is absolutely worth the sacrifices this demands.

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