

## Parashat Noah

### Noah and Moshe - a Midrashic Comparison:

**“Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age” (6:9)**

**“...you alone have I found righteous before Me in this generation” (7:1)**

Our parsha begins with a description of a world of *“hamas”* (6:11) - violence, chaos, societal breakdown. Humanity has degenerated to frightening depths: *“All the thoughts of (man’s) heart are towards evil, all the time”* (6:5). God decides to destroy the human race. *“I have decided to put an end to all flesh”* (6:13). At first glance, it appears that God’s decision to put an end to humanity is unequivocal and absolute. Humanity will be totally destroyed. But then, unexpectedly, we read of an exception, a lone individual who might survive the devastation.

“The Lord said, I will blot out from the earth the men who I created ... for I regret that I made them. But Noah found favour with the Lord.” (6:7-8)

Noah would seem to be quite something. His stature is such that he can escape the global Armageddon. Clearly he is a lone pillar of integrity in a degenerate world. In dramatic contrast to his fellow citizens, his personality broadcasts a message of goodness, his good deeds, his independent sense of morality, his fear of God, single him out as a Tzaddik. Indeed it is somewhat terrifying that in an entire world, only one lone individual might be found worthy.

#### THE MIDRASH

With this as our background let us progress to our texts, the Midrashim that compare Moshe with Noah. Noah is the hero of our Parsha. He is the only righteous person of an entire generation. It is only natural to see a desire on the part of the Midrash to compare him with another Tzaddik, Moshe, but also puzzling to see the way he is “put down” in the comparison with Moshe. Let us begin with the first Midrash - Devarim Rabba 11:3 (midrash 1).

The discussion here seems somewhat egotistical: “I am better than you ... I am superior to you,” but this is just the style of the Midrash. Let us delve into the claims of each one.

“Noah said to Moshe: ‘I am greater than you because I was delivered from the generation of the Flood.’  
Moshe replied: ‘I am superior to you. You saved yourself but you had no strength to deliver your generation; but I saved both myself and my generation when they were condemned to destruction at the time of the Golden Calf.’ Whence this? ‘And the Lord repented (*vayinachem*) of the evil which He said He would do to His people’ (Ex 32:14)....”

Why is Noah better than Moshe? He says “I was delivered from the generation of the Flood.” So what? What implication does this have for Moshe? Did Moshe have his own “Flood”?

to my mind, this exchange hides a very hurtful jibe at Moshe. Noah suggests that whereas he outlived his evil generation due to his righteousness, Moses did not outlive his generation. After all, was Moses not restricted from entering the Land of Israel? In the wilderness generation, who was allowed in to

Israel and who was restricted from entering? The sinners of the “spies” episode were barred from the land and the next innocent generation is allowed to enter the land. And what of Moshe? - He dies with the sinners in the desert. What conclusion might one reach? That Moshe too is guilty! Noah outlives his evil generation. Moshe dies with them. Is he also somehow implicated in their sin? (See Devarim 1: 37, 3:26)

Moshe replies to Noah’s accusation: “Yes maybe I died with my generation, but my generation lived and died a natural death. Your generation was killed in the Flood. You sat back and watched them die. I used all my energy in a titanic effort to save their lives.”

#### BEGIN MY WORLD ANEW

Here we have the first parallel between Moshe and Noah. They were both offered a most weighty proposal. They were both given the opportunity to become the beginning of a new nation/world where all the sinners around them would perish.

With Moshe (Ex 32:14) in the wake of the Golden Calf:

“Leave me for a moment and I will destroy their memory from under the heavens and I will make you into a stronger nation than them”

With Noah (6:17):

“I am about to bring the Flood - waters upon the earth - to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is a breath of life ... But I will establish my covenant with you (Noah)...”

They are given the same offer. You live and the others will die. Moses is outraged. Noah accepts.

Moses prays, argues, bargains with God and eventually the decree is revoked.

‘And the Lord repented (*vayinachem*) of the evil which He said He would do to His people’ (Ex 32:14)....”

With Noah, the same phrase is used for the Divine decree of destruction, but it is precisely this sentence of death which remains in effect despite Noah:

“And God regretted (*vayinachem*) that he had made man .... The Lord said ‘I will blot them out....’” (6:7)

[Do note the connection between the word “*vayinachem*” and the name Noah as the verse in Bereshit 5:26 indicates]

#### SPIRITUAL DARWINISM

God’s idea is somewhat sound: The people have gone rotten. They are beyond repair. Destroy them and use a tzaddik as the progenitor of a new civilisation. Maybe it will work! Maybe it will create a more righteous future! What is so bad? If we weed out the evil of each generation and breed only the good people, we will have a better future, the spiritually “fittest” will survive, a selection process that should reap good fruit. What is wrong with spiritual Darwinism?

Apparently, Noah accepts this situation. Does he agree with the plan ideally? At the very least, he accepts God’s plan in practice and does not fight this decree. Moshe however, is different. He cannot stomach the abandonment of Am Yisrael. How can one give up hope on the entire nation? Whatever they have done, you don’t destroy a nation in its entirety! This cannot be done to Am Yisrael! Moshe says, “If you destroy them, destroy me too.”

Noah DID save the world. But in what way did he save

humanity? At what cost?

It is somewhat ironic that Noah's birth is accompanied by a hopeful prayer. His name - Noah (rest) - emerges from the wish:

"May this one relieve (yenachamenu) us of our labour and the pain of our hands in the soil that God has cursed." (5:29)

Noah should bring relief (yenachamenu) to a troubled world. Except that rather than working to **improve** the world, to relieve its suffering, by healing and assisting humanity and saving it from within, he upgrades the world by letting it die (vayinachem) and by he - Noah - the sole survivor, creating a world anew. Now the result will be secured. The world will be less violent, more ethical and orderly, but look at the methods, look at the cost!

The Zohar (1:254) pictures God Himself as criticising Noah for his laid-back attitude:

"When I told you that you were the only tzaddik in the generation, I informed you so that you might pray for them and request mercy! When you realised that YOU would be saved via the Ark, you were no longer moved to appeal to Me for mercy!"

## PARALLELS

So we have a first similarity between Noah and Moshe: The offer to start the world anew with them as the seed, the progenitor. This, however, is not the only similarity between Moshe and Noah. There are others.

1. They both float on water in an ark - a "teva".
2. In both cases, the "teva" is waterproofed with pitch (6:14 and Rashi there).
3. Another textual parallel: 40 days and nights. They both spend the same period in blessed isolation; Moses at the heights of Mt. Sinai and Noah in the ark.
4. In this context note that, in the same way that Noah waits 7 days before the 40 days of the flood ensue (7:4), Moshe also waits 7 days before his 40 day period on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:16).

Maybe the summation of these CONCEPTUAL and TEXTUAL similarities allows the Midrash to draw comparisons between the two figures<sup>1</sup>. (And interestingly enough the Kedushat Levi tells us in his opening comments this week that according to the AriZal, Moshe is a "gilgul" of Noah. Now I am far from being a chasid of the doctrine of gilgul, but if I understand his point, he would seem to be stating that it is as if Noah is given a second chance to "get it right" in the personality of Moshe! Maybe the kabbalists application of gilgul is the what Tanach scholar's call a "parallel" :-))

## PROGRESSION

"R. Berechia said: Moshe is more special than

<sup>1</sup> First, a few words about technique. Methodologically speaking, whenever we detect a "theme" in the Midrash, or an ongoing comparison, we have to ask ourselves:

1. Why is the source of the comparison? - Textual similarities? - Similar circumstances?
2. What is the purpose of the comparison, or, what lessons does it teach?

Noah. Noah moved from the status of "a righteous man" (6,9) to "a man of the earth"(9,20), whereas Moshe began as an "Egyptian man"(Ex 2:19) and progressed to become "A man of God"(Deut 33:1)..." Bereshit Rabba 36:3

This fascinating Midrash draws upon a contrasting parallel between these two figures. The key word is "Ish". Noah moves from 'Ish tzaddik' to 'Ish Adama'. Moshe moves from his 'Ish Mitzri' status to 'Ish Elokim' - the auspicious God-Man, reaching the human limits of Godliness.

This Midrash appears in the "scene" immediately following the flood episode, in which we watch Noah begin his new world by planting a vineyard and getting drunk. Of course, It is possible that he was not aware of the effects of wine on his system, but still, the pristine image of the "tzaddik" is somewhat tarnished when we reflect upon the image of a drunk Noah rolling about naked in his tent. What has happened to our Tzaddik, Noah? Has he fallen from his spiritual heights, down to the physical "earth"?

At the start of the Noah story, Noah is presented as someone who can resist his generation and their hedonistic indulgences. He would seem to be a person capable of control, holding himself back from being sucked in to the vices and perversities of the Flood generation. But now, we see him out of control, rolling naked in a drunken stupor. Questions are raised about Noah. Has he changed? Was he really so righteous or was it only a relative thing (Rashi see 6:9), in comparison with the people around him? - had he lived at another time, in a different place, maybe he would not have stood out.

Moshe's life on the other hand, is a life of constant and steady progression. He begins as an Egyptian prince with a conscience, becomes a faithful shepherd, is chosen for leadership by God, rises to levels higher still when he communes with God in Mt. Sinai. Eventually, Moses reaches a spiritual level unmatched by another human.

Moses' direction is heavenwards. Noah has no visible signs of piety.

## ANTI-CHRISTIAN POLEMIC.

Thus far, we have tried to analyse the midrashim from within, from text and context. I did however, hear a more historical angle on this Midrash, in the name of Rabbi Dr. Irving Jacobs from Jews' College, London. He explained that these midrashim emerge from the era of early struggle between Christianity and Judaism in the formative years, when Christianity was braking away from Judasim and trying to justify itself vis a vis Judaism.

The Christians had rejected Mitzvot Ma'asiyot - Halacha. They abandoned the performance of circumcision and kashrut etc. To support their case, they sought out Biblical models - tzaddikim - who were chosen by God despite their NOT keeping Torah MiSinai. Noah was an ideal candidate. He is given the title "Tzaddik", but yet, we see no trace of Mitzvot. - an ideal role model. They looked to Noah as a justification of their new religion.

How did the Rabbis respond to this new "reading" of Noah as a person?

We all know that many midrashim have their origin in the sermons of Rabbis of those times. These were the derashot given in the shuls of Tzipori, Lydda, Tiberias. Why would the Rabbis "put down" Noah and prefer Moshe? After all, the text does tell us that Noah was a tzaddik. Rabbi Irving Jacobs suggests that it was a response to the mood of the age. Because the Christians venerated Noah, the Rabbis responded by demonstrating how, despite his righteousness,

Noah could not compare with Moses - the lawgiver himself - source of *Torah shebichtav* and *Torah shebeal peh*.

This approach is interesting in its placing our "drash" in a definitive historical framework. However, as we have demonstrated, the Biblical parallels and textual nuances in themselves leave a clear opening for a more negative view of Noah independently of the ancient Rabbinic polemic.

#### LESSONS FOR TODAY

Let us return to an earlier point, and to something which may give you some food for thought.

Noah saves his generation by giving up on the rotten element and saving the good. Moses is unwilling to follow this path. He prefers to work with everyone, despite their sins, despite their faults and mistaken direction. He will not give up on Am Yisrael.

This got me thinking about today's Jewish world. Inter-marriage is running at 50% and more. Assimilation is happening before our very eyes. Over 80% of Jews today are non-observant. Are Am Yisrael are sinking, drowning? What are the prospects for the future?

Some people have a Noah attitude. We will lock ourselves in the "Teva", in our hermetic, religious communities, protect our children, and bolster ourselves. Better to save a few. Let the Torah world be strong, and if we lose the others, what can we do?

But this is not the attitude of Moshe Rabbeinu. He cares for Am Yisrael as a nation. He holds on tenaciously, refusing to give up hope on a single Jew. He tries to bring the entire nation, however distant, however far removed. When I think about it, maybe Moshe's attitude DID cost him his entrance ticket into Eretz Yisrael. Had he accepted God's offer, he would have entered the Promised Land. By leading his malfunctioning generation, he too lost his chance to enter Israel. But the thought of condemning the nation of Israel as sinners, branding them as wicked, was unthinkable to Moshe. He wished to steer the entire nation, with the good and the bad, the observant and the non-observant, to the Promised Land.

So - are you with Moses, or are you with Noah?

Shabbat Shalom!