

PARASHAT NOACH

Survival and Revival -

On the Righteousness of Noach

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I.

The story of Noach ends tragically. We part from Noach and his family not after the deliverance of a divine blessing (9:1-7) or the establishment of a divine covenant (9:8-17), but rather after the strange and disturbing events at the end of Chapter Nine.

And Noach began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: and he drank of the wine and was drunk; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Cham, the father of Kena'an, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. And Shem and Yefet took the garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noach awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him□ (9:19-24)

The story itself abounds with difficulty. What exactly happened? What did Cham, the father of Kena'an, or Kena'an and Cham on some interpretations, do to Noach? What does the text hint at in the opaque phrase "done to him?" The options suggested range from the relatively mild acts of observing and publicizing (Ibn Ezra, Ramban) on the one hand, to the far more sinister acts of castration or rape on the other hand (Rashi). Either way, whether one interprets the action of Cham-Kena'an as mere disrespect and mockery or as more serious crimes, the story depicts Noach drunken, sexually vulnerable and perhaps even sexually abused by his children. In sum, he is completely disgraced - a surprising twist in the story of a righteous man.

II.

A complex parallel between the end of the Noach narrative and the Lot story should help reinforce this sense of unease. In a general sense, the story of the destruction of the generation of the flood in Parashat Noach and the account of the destruction of Sedom in Parashat Vayera are thematically parallel. Both present stories of God's destruction of a bad society/place/world. In line with this broad thematic parallel, we can easily note numerous specific linguistic and narrative parallels. The Torah utilizes the word "ra," meaning bad or wicked, to describe both objects of God's wrath when they are first introduced ([Bereishit 6:5](#) and 13:13). Similarly, the verb for destruction (shachot) is the same in both stories (6:13 and 19:13,14,29). In both cases, the term first appears (signifying destruction) in a speech by God or a divine emissary heralding the incipient destruction to the leader of the single family destined to escape the destruction - Noach (6:13) and Lot (19:12-14). Furthermore, in both cases the Torah utilizes the same verb stem, m.t.r. (meaning "rain down"), to describe God's method of destruction. Just as the flood is wrought by "raining down" (7:4), so too the "brimstone and fire" storm that devastates Sedom comes "raining down" (19:24).

A closer look at these stories reveals that they parallel each other in more than just destruction theme and language. As mentioned previously, in both cases a single family is saved, seemingly escaping just in the nick of time (see 7:6-7, Rashi and 19:16-17,21-24). Furthermore, in both narratives, God's mercy and rescue are connected to His "remembering" a single "perfect" man who "walks" with God. In the story of Sedom, God "remembers" Avraham (19:29), who had been commanded by God to "walk before Me and be perfect" (17:1). Consequently, due to Abraham's merit, God saves Lot. In the story of the flood, God "remembers" Noach (8:1), a man previously described as "perfect in his generations," a man who "walked with God" (6:9). Of course here, it is the virtuous Noach himself who is saved. Unlike the undeserving Lot, who is saved only by virtue of his relation to a righteous man, Noach is rescued on the basis of merit. He is the righteous man, both the cause and the object of God's rescue.

Finally, these destruction-rescue stories are parallel in one last and crucial fashion. We all remember the sad end of Lot. (For a refresher, take a look at [Bereishit 19:30-35](#).) Alone with his children in a small enclosed space (19:30), he is drunk, sexually vulnerable, and exploited by his very own children - debauched and disgraced. But this of course is the end of Noach, alone with his children, in a small enclosed space (9:21), drunk, sexually vulnerable, and exploited by his very own children - debauched and disgraced.

All of this should come into focus if we map out the parallel logically. In stage one, which we may term "the righteous man," Noach is the cause of the rescue and stands in parallel to Avraham, the cause of the rescue from Sedom. Stage two, "destruction," apparently contains no human characters in either story, and need not concern us now. In stage three, "rescue," Noach stands parallel to Lot, a wholly undeserving and morally crippled creature who had chosen to settle in Sedom despite the evil character of its citizens (13:9-13). But this is not necessarily disturbing. As pointed out previously, unlike Lot, Noach is saved by his own virtue. The point of the parallel and contrast at this point is to denigrate Lot, not Noach. However, in the fourth stage, "end," once again Noach parallels Lot. Like Lot, he is withdrawn, drunk, abused and disgraced. Here the point of the parallel seems to be the opposite of stage three: not the denigration of Lot, but the denigration of Noach. Noach has become Lot.

Put a slightly different way, as we moved through the parallel, on the literary plane Noach moves from the Avraham role, the role of the righteous man, to the Lot role, the role of the undeserving man. At the end of the story of Sedom, we find Avraham standing and observing the destruction (19:27-28). He stands literally and metaphorically "in front of God," outside the desperation and disgrace of Lot. But such is not the fate of Noach. He stands only in the Lot role, inside the wretched drunkenness and disgrace, far from the face of God.

What strange circumstance has transformed Noach into the equal of Lot? What has happened to our "perfect" and righteous man by whose virtue Mankind was saved?

III.

Let us turn to the question of Noach's righteousness. In its preface to the story of the flood at the end of Parashat Bereishit (6:1-8) and also throughout the early parts of Parashat Noach (6:9-7:5), the Torah informs us repeatedly of Noach's unique status and righteousness. Noach is described variously as "finding favor in the eyes of God" (6:8), "righteous and perfect in his generation" (6:9), "the sole righteous one of this generation" (7:1) and as one who "walked with God" (6:9). Noach is different than those around him; he does not participate in the social, moral and sexual corruption of his era (see 6:1-12, Rashi 6:11).

However, in addition to this method of description, the Torah also employs another far subtler tool to emphasize Noach's uniqueness. After reporting the instructions given by God to Noach for building

the ark and gathering the animals (6:13-22), the Torah informs us, "And Noach did according to all that God commanded him; so he did" (6:22). As if for emphasis, the phrase appears again in slight variation just a few verses later (7:5) after additional commands from God (7:1-4). At first glance, the conceptual pair of God's command and Noach's obedience might not strike us as significant; after all, when God talks one should listen. But let us reconsider.

The term "command" (and its verb stem, tz.v.h.) has appeared in only one other context until this point. This is in fact the term utilized to describe God's forbidding the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (2:16). Likewise, God's Himself uses the command term in interrogating Adam. God inquires whether he has "□eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from it?" (3:11).

Unlike Adam and Eve, who proved themselves incapable of obeying the simple command of not eating a particular fruit, Noach proves himself capable of obeying the most arduous commands. Noach does not evade, disobey or even reply. He simply carries out God's word, no matter how Herculean the task, no matter the size of the boat, the number of animals to be gathered or the amount of food to be collected. Noach's uniqueness lies not just in his uprightness and morality, but also in his obedience to the command of God.

IV.

Undoubtedly, as argued above, the command-response section of the flood narrative describing Noach's obedience and righteousness (6:13-7:5) provides crucial insight into our understanding of Noach and consequently the story of the flood. A deeper examination of the section should help us further sharpen our insight into Noach, the ark and the flood. Let us begin our examination at the end, taking a careful look at 7:1-5.

And God said to Noach: Come, you and all your house into the ark; for only you have I seen righteous before Me in this generation. Of every clean (tahor) beast you shall take sevens, male and female: and of beasts that are not clean two, male and female. Of birds of the air, also sevens, the male and the female; to revive seed upon the face of earth. For in another seven days, I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and I will blot out every living substance that I have made from the face of the earth.

And Noah did according to all that God commanded him.

Logically, the subsection contains the following points: 1) an instruction to Noah to enter the ark, 2) the information that Noah is a righteous man, 3) instructions to Noah regarding the animals, 4) God's intention to destroy the world, and 5) the statement that Noah did exactly as God commanded. But none of this is particularly new. In the command-response section until this point (6:13-22), Noah has already been told about entering the ark (6:18). With regard to the second point, we of course already know that God's rescue is due to the fact that Noah is righteous (6:9). Furthermore, Noah has already been instructed regarding the animals (6:19-20) and told that God intends to destroy the world (6:17). Finally, we already know that Noah did and does precisely as God commands (6:22). We may very well ask ourselves: What purpose does this second command-response section serve?

Perhaps the answer to this problem lies not in noting the similarities to what has come previously, but rather in focusing on the differences between the second command-response section and the narrative until this point. As pointed out by Ramban, the second section includes for the first time the command to gather seven male-female sets of "tahor" animals and birds. Previously, Noah had been commanded to take into the ark "two," apparently one male-female set, of "all flesh," "the birds to their kind" and "the cattle to their kind" (6:18-19). According to Ramban, the purpose of the "tahor" animals is to serve as a resource for sacrifices after Noah emerges from the ark. By implication, the entire second command-response section exists solely to implicitly command Noah in the "mitzva" of sacrifices.

But this explanation seems difficult to maintain. Could not this information and "command" have been folded into the first command-response section, as part of the command to gather animals?

Alternatively, we may focus on a second crucial difference between 7:1-5 and all that has come previously. In explaining the purpose of gathering the animals and entering the ark, the text utilizes the phrase, "lechayot zera al penei kol ha-aretz" (7:3). However, previously in the first command-response section, the term used as the rationale for gathering the animals and entering the ark is the subtly different "lehachayot" (6:18-20), bereft of the additional, "zera al penei kol ha-aretz." But what exactly is the difference?

In fact, the phrases possess very different connotations. The bare phrase, "lehachayot," is probably best translated as, "to keep alive," or colloquially, "to survive." In the first command-response section, the rationale of the ark is survival. God the Creator wishes that something of His labor be preserved. He chooses Noach and two of each species as "survivors," or perhaps even "relics," representatives of the world that once was. In contrast, the different and full phrase, "lehachayot zera al penei kol ha-aretz," is best translated as, "to make alive seed upon the entire face of the earth," or in more colloquial terms, "to revive life upon the earth." The rationale of the ark is far more than mere survival. Rather, it is about reviving the entire world. It is future-oriented rather than past-oriented, its inhabitants intended as prototypes for a new world rather than just survivors and relics of an old one. God wishes that the world be made anew and charges Noach with the task.

On this account, the command to gather the "tahor," clean, animals can be seen in a new light. Quite possibly, they are for the purpose of sacrifices. A world in which man expresses thanksgiving to God is far better than one in which he fails to acknowledge God. However, we might also claim that "tahor" here does not necessarily mean "clean" in the halakhic sense of permissible for sacrifice. Perhaps the term connotes "pure" in contrast to "corrupt," as in the "corruption of all flesh upon the earth," the all-encompassing distortion of nature which includes even the animal world (see Rashi 6:12). Just as Noach, the righteous man, is chosen as a prototype for a new humanity, so too the "tahor" animals, the uncorrupted flesh of the animal world, are chosen as a new majority in the animal world, to remake the world as a new and better place.

All of this should bring us to a good understanding of Noach's character, the purpose of the ark, and the text of the first part of the flood narrative. Noach is righteous, and has been unique in obeying God's command. The purpose of the ark is dual, and hence the text deals with a dual theme. It is about survival, but also about much more. It is also about revival, the process of remaking the world. Without doubt, Noach fares well at the task of survival. He builds the ark, gathers the supplies and animals, and enters the ark exactly as commanded by God (6:22,7:5,9,16). But what about the second task? What about reviving and remaking the world? How well does the righteous and obedient man bear this task?

V.

Let us take a look at the latter part of Chapter Eight, the emergence from the ark. God commands Noach as follows:

- Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and their wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you, of all flesh, both of birds and of cattle,
- and swarm on the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth. (8:16-17)

Noach is given three commands. The first is to leave the ark in male-female pairs. The second is to actively bring the animals out of the ark. Both of these commands anticipate and constitute preparation for the third command, the demand to swarm across the newly made earth and procreate. Noach and his band stand at the cusp of a new world, both opportunity and responsibility, facing the demand to revive and remake the world.

Immediately following the command, the Torah records Noach's response to God's threefold command.

And Noach and his sons went out, and his wife and his son's wives □ every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird and whatever creeps on the earth after their kind went out of the ark. (8:18-19)

Quite clearly, something has gone awry. In place of Noach leaving the ark along with his wife, in male-female pairs, he leaves in the company of his sons. Likewise, Noach is not depicted as bringing out the animals; they are left behind and seem to emerge by themselves without the help and assistance of Noach. Rather than an image of a mixed group of male-female pairs emerging prepared to repopulate the world, we are presented with a linear image of three separate groups: men, women and animals. Furthermore, the apparent purpose of leaving the ark, the imperative to procreate, the third aspect of God's threefold command, is wholly neglected in the "response" stage. In fact, Noach's segregated, linear emergence from the ark and neglect of the animals seems calculated to negate the procreation re-population imperative (see Abarbanel).

On the simplest level, we are confronted with an act of disobedience. For the first time, we find Noach not being Noach, not obeying the command of God. In fact, this is the first command of God to Noach regarding which the text does not state, "And Noach did as God commanded." On a deeper level, the refusal or perhaps inability of Noach to procreate, swarm over the earth, assist the animals, etc., signals Noach's inability to succeed at the "revival" aspect of his task. While confronted with the task of survival, Noach excelled. He was the perfect divine servant. But now confronted with reviving the world, he no longer obeys the word of God.

VI.

This key should help us unlock the mysteries of the remainder of the story of Noach and the riddle of his "transformation." In line with the claims made above, Abarbanel points out that much of Chapter Nine can be viewed as a divine attempt to rescue Noach, this time from himself. At the beginning of the chapter, God blesses Mankind, expresses special concern for Mankind, and distinguishes Man from the animals by allowing Man to consume meat (9:1-7). The blessing begins and ends with the imperative to "be fruitful, multiply and fill the world." God follows with a covenant and a sign, a promise never to destroy the world again (9:17). All of this is intended to bolster Noach. God cares about Mankind and the world. He desires their revival. He has promised a covenantal relation and permanent existence. Noach should be revived and begin to revive the world.

This brings us full circle to the end of Chapter Nine and the drunken Noach. Rather than finding a renewed Noach, roaming and remaking the world, we find Noach in an enclosed space, withdrawn, drunk, engaged only in the bliss of the bottle. Rather than engaging in the imperative of procreation and filling the world, we find Noach, naked and sexually compromised by his son.

In sum, the story of the "end of Noach" is not so much the story of the transformation of a righteous man but the story of the limits of Noach's righteousness. His righteousness is capable of surmounting and surviving great challenges, from upright existence in the midst of an evil society, through the daunting multi-year task of building the ark and living in it. It is even a righteousness that is capable of enduring the destruction of the world and emerging to thank God for His mercy and rescue. It is this very righteousness that fostered Noach's spiritual survival and thriving amidst the society of the flood generation. But at the end of the day, it is a righteousness of survival. It is oriented solely along a God-self axis that does not include the world. Consequently, it is not a righteousness that is oriented to the world. It is not a righteousness that cares about the world and is capable of its renewal, rebuilding and revival.

A final return to the Sedom-flood parallel and the Noach-Avraham-Lot triangle should help buttress this point. As pointed out earlier, the person-parallels shift as the parallel progresses through its various stages: "the righteous man," "destruction," "rescue" and "end." In stage one, "the righteous man," Noach is the cause of the rescue and stands in parallel to Avraham, the cause of the rescue from Sedom. As of stage three, "rescue," Noach overlaps with Lot, but at least as the cause of his own rescue. However, by the time we reach stage four, "end," Noach stands in complete parallel to

Lot, debauched and disgraced, his righteousness in shambles. When making this point earlier, I claimed that stage two, "destruction," apparently contains no human characters and is not relevant to our person-parallel progression. In fact, the key word here is "apparently." The destruction of Sodom does indeed contain a human character. His name is Avraham.

The story of the destruction of Sodom begins textually with God sharing His plans of destruction with the "righteous man" (18:17-21). This section is framed on either side by verses describing the ongoing journey of the "men" towards Sodom and its imminent destruction (18:16,22). Avraham's response is immediate and well-known: he prays (18:22-33). He prays for justice, for mercy, for the bad society of Sodom, for even ten good men. The silence of the "righteous man" in the flood story thunders by contrast. Noah is silent. He builds, he gathers, he obeys, he enters the ark; the world is destroyed, he survives, and he even thanks God. But he never expresses a sentiment or prayer for the world around him. Once again, his righteousness is the righteousness of the self, an isolated and private righteousness. It is not a righteousness oriented to the world, capable of praying for the world before disaster, or rebuilding it afterwards.

Noah is not Avraham in the second stage of our parallel. His righteousness may be thought of as a two-place relation, a pair consisting of self and God, rather than a triangular relation of God, self and world. From there on, it seems that the slow slide to complete overlap with Lot, the undeserving survivor, is just a slippery slope away. Perhaps we are to derive that righteousness of the self, isolated and private, is not only limited but also prone to decay. Perhaps the lesson is to be a little bit less like Noah and a little bit more like Avraham, to construct a righteousness engaged with the world, a righteousness of revival and not just survival.