

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Noach
October 2020 / Cheshvan 5781

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Noach – The rise and fall of Noach

Welcome back to the 8th year of Darchai Noam!

In this week's Parasha of Noach we read the story of Noah and his Ark. Noach was undoubtedly a great Tzaddik. Hashem chose him to carry on the human race and repopulate the world. Noach did repopulate the world, but things did not go as smoothly as expected. Noah didn't quite live up to his potential. What went wrong, and what can we learn from that?

The first item on Noach's to do list when he came out of the Ark was to plant a vineyard. He drank the wine and became drunk. The Midrash describes the effect of the alcohol in graphic terms.¹ First he was like a sheep who acts humble and meek. Then, when he drank more, he felt that he was as mighty as a lion and began to brag. After another drink he became like a monkey, dancing, giggling, speaking nonsense and not realising what he was doing. Finally, he became like a pig, rolling around in the dirt. In his drunken state he lay uncovered in his tent. His young grandson Canaan took the opportunity to perpetrate a terrible crime on his grandfather². While the precise details are not spelled out clearly, some say that Canaan castrated Noach so that there would be no more children to share the inheritance.

Why did the righteous Noach fall to such a low level? He was charged by Hashem with repopulating the world from scratch. This is quite an awesome responsibility. The previous attempt at populating the world was a dismal failure - the human race had declined to such a low level that Hashem decided to destroy them all with a flood. Perhaps Noach did not believe that he had what it took to meet this challenge. So he tried to escape reality with the help of alcohol.

Yet, Noach made another even earlier mistake. In this week's Haftarah, the flood is referred to as “the waters of Noach”³. Why was the flood called after Noach's name? Surely he wasn't to blame for the flood. Rather, the flood was a punishment for everyone else's wicked behaviour! The Zohar explains that Noach should have tried to encourage others to do teshuva and he should have prayed for them. Noach spent 120 years building the Ark and throughout this whole period of time he did not succeed in convincing one person to do teshuva.

Many commentators compare Noach to Avraham. When Avraham was told that Sodom and Gomorrah were to be destroyed, he begged and prayed for them to be saved. He entered into a long dialogue with Hashem trying to find a reason to avoid the decree. Why didn't Noach try to save his generation?

Perhaps Noach saw the level of degradation to which the generation had fallen and he decided that there was no point in even trying. Or perhaps he thought that it was not his role to do 'kiruv' and try to improve others. Noach's behaviour is perhaps understandable, however we can learn

¹ Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 13

² Some commentators say that it was Cham who did the terrible deed.

³ Yeshayahu 53:9.

the error of his ways from a chilling episode brought by the Gemara:⁴ Rav Acha the son of Rav Chanina said, Hashem never issued a good decree and then retracted it except for one case. Hashem was about to issue a decree of destruction against Jerusalem. He instructed the angel Gabriel to put a special mark on the forehead of the righteous inhabitants so that when He released the angels of destruction, they would know who should be spared. The Attribute of Strict Justice complained and asked why the righteous were being protected when they failed to rebuke their fellow man and did not try to help them to improve their ways. They should have tried to encourage the wicked people to do teshuva. Therefore, argued the Attribute of Strict Justice, the righteous are culpable! Hashem argued in defence of the righteous people – “it is revealed before Me that even if the righteous people would have protested, they would not have been successful. The wicked people would not have paid any attention”. “That’s all very nice”, responded the Attribute of Strict Justice, “it was revealed before You, but it wasn’t revealed before them!” In other words, since the righteous people didn’t know that their attempts to help the wicked do teshuva would fail, they were culpable for not trying to rebuke the wicked people. With that, the Gemara continues, the Attribute of Strict Justice ‘persuaded’ Hashem to rescind the decree and the righteous were punished first!

This story teaches us the importance of trying to help guide others and encourage them to do teshuva. Noach should have made more of an effort to save his generation, through actively encouraging them to change and praying for them, even if he suspected that he would not be successful.

Thus, it seems that Noach fell short twice – before the flood he did not take on the responsibility to help others and after the flood he tried to escape his responsibility to build up the world. We can suggest that both of these shortcomings have the same underlying cause – a failure to take responsibility. Perhaps Noach did not feel that he was up to the challenge.

In contrast, Avraham did whatever he could to save Sodom and Gomorrah. Even though he was ultimately unsuccessful, that didn’t stop him from trying his utmost. He realised that it was his duty and responsibility to respond to Hashem and to care for the welfare of others.

Perhaps one factor that inhibits us from trying to fulfil our own responsibilities or helping others to fulfil theirs, is a confusion about who is responsible for the outcome. We may erroneously feel that we are in control of the outcome, and therefore if the task is too daunting, we may give up. However, in truth, Hashem controls the outcome and all Hashem wants from us is to do our very best to serve Him and try to do what is right. Once we have done our best, we can then leave the rest up to Him. If we realise that we are not responsible for the outcome, we may be more willing to give things a go.

Our duty is to try our best to fulfil what Hashem wants from us and to show Hashem that we care by helping others to improve and fulfil their own roles too.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Remember Noach’s two failings – failing to care about helping his generation and trying to avoid his own responsibility in repopulating the world.
2. When we face a difficult task and we are not sure whether or not we will succeed, we can try to remember that Hashem is in charge of the outcome. All we need to do is try our best and ask Hashem for help.

⁴ Gemara Shabbat 55a.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe to Darchai Noam, please email darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'Subscribe' in the subject.