

Noah

Noah, Traits, Light, and Tears

In the *Torah* portion *Noah* we learn how Noah was a righteous man. He was perfect in his generation. The rabbis all comment, how come it says that he was perfect in his generation? One rabbi says that he was perfect only in his generation, that if he had lived in the generation of Abraham, he would not be considered such a righteous man. Other rabbis say, no, that if Noah would have lived in the generation of Abraham, he would have even been a greater person. Why is it that the rabbis have this disagreement about Noah?

Also, why is it that after the flood occurred G-d chose the rainbow to be the sign of His determination never again to destroy the world with water? Finally, what was really the sin of the Tower of Babel? Why were the people punished because they wanted to build a tower? Why should G-d have considered that to be such a terrible offense?

I think we can understand the answer to these questions if we understand who were the rabbis who adopted the different positions vis a vis Noah. We know that Rabbi Yochanan is the one who said that if Noah would have lived in a different generation he would have just been considered a mediocre man. He would not have been considered an especially righteous man. It was Resh Lokesh who said that if Noah would have lived in Abraham's generation, he would not only have been a righteous man, but he would have been an even more righteous man. Why is it that these rabbis differ so much?

It seems to me that really the question here is the question of nature versus nurture. Rabbi Yochanan was a person who was more or less born to be a great Talmudic scholar. It was prophesied to his mother that he was going to be a great scholar. He was also a very handsome man and the father of nine children. He was known as the greatest authority of his age. The Jerusalem *Talmud* is based almost entirely upon his teachings. The Babylonian *Talmud*, too, to a large extent, is based on the teachings of Rabbi Yochanan.

Resh Lokesh, on the other hand, was a person who came from an ambiguous background. He apparently as a youth came from a good family because he learned in the same *yeshiva* as Rabbi Yochanan, but then some-

thing happened. Perhaps his family was considered to be traitors to Rome, and he was taken away and made a gladiator. Then, after several years as a gladiator, he became a brigand and started to rob people. One day when Rabbi Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan, Resh Lokesh came by and stole his clothes. Rabbi Yochanan immediately recognized him, and he called him back and said, "Resh Lokesh, Shimon, Come with me and let's learn together again at *yeshiva*. He also reminded him that he had a very beautiful sister, so Resh Lokesh decided that he would try the *yeshiva* life again. He went back with Rabbi Yochanan to his *yeshiva*. After a few weeks, he decided he wanted to be a brigand again. He left the *yeshiva* but he did not have the heart anymore to be a brigand and went back to the *yeshiva* and became one of the greatest scholars of that era, marrying Rabbi Yochanan's sister. The disputes between Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lokesh are the matrix upon which many of the discussions of the *Talmud* are based. Rabbi Yochanan was of the opinion that once a person had certain traits, these person's traits would always be with them. Noah was essentially a passive man. In Noah's generation, he was considered a righteous man because in his generation the proper course of action was just to be passive, do what G-d told you to do, stay away from the other people because they will just corrupt you and your family, and live a passive existence away from most of the people. But if he would have lived in Abraham's generation, being passive was not the thing to do. He would have to have interacted with the people. He would have had to influence other people. He would have had to, as Abraham did, change world history. Rabbi Yochanan thought that Noah was not up to it.

Noah was, by nature, a passive man and that was the way he was going to be. One of the main heresies of Communism was that it believed that all men were equal in intelligence, talent, etc., and the only thing that differentiated one human being from another was a bad childhood or terrible state regulations but that basically everybody could be anything that he wanted to be. Anybody who has raised children knows that this is not so. People are not born equal. Children are born with definite traits, and these traits can be molded and shaped for good or bad, but they are still traits that endure. A child who is born with a stubborn streak will be stubborn all his life. He can use that stubbornness to be firm in religious observance, to

be firm in support of moral principles or he could use it arbitrarily just to be stubborn for stubborn's sake. All traits can be used either for good or bad, but a person's basic traits are formed when he is young. We all know that if we take a Ford and put a Chevrolet fender on it, it looks like a Ford. Resh Lokesh was of the opinion that that may be true about personality traits but that you could compensate for them. You could change them. You may have been born with a violent nature, but you can sublimate your violence in *Talmudic* discussion, as he, himself, had done. He felt that Noah would have been an even greater man in a different generation. He believed that what motivated Noah was his desire to do good and to serve G-d and, if in this generation what was required of him was to be passive, then he would be passive, while if in another generation what would be required of him would be to be active, then he would be active. He could be flexible. He would not have stubbornly clung to one mode of behavior. He could modify his traits because of his compassion for the people around him. That was what the sin of the people of the generation who built the tower was. They had become enamored with ideas and had room for compassion. They were intellectuals who felt that there was no necessity to make any compromise with their ideals, and they did not have any sense of compassion. They built their tower because they believed that every 1656 years a comet was going to visit the earth which was going to destroy humanity. The rabbis explain that that is exactly what caused the flood. A comet either came close or hit the earth and caused a great tidal wave. They determined that they had to survive so, therefore, they built this huge tower which would rise above any flood waters. If the flood waters would destroy them, at least they would leave behind a remembrance of other people who would know they had existed. They felt compelled to organize human society around this idea, and if certain people did not do what they were supposed to do in order to create this tower, then these people were to be severely punished. They also demonstrated their lack of compassion by their reactions to different wars. If a brick would fall down, they would all mourn but if a human being would fall down and die or be injured, they couldn't care less. They would keep going on with the work. Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lokesh when they argue about Noah, are not arguing whether or not Noah remonstrated with his own people to try to convince

them to repent. After all, when he was building the ark, people would come to him and ask him questions, and the rabbis agree that Noah would tell them why and try to convince them to repent. What they are arguing about is why Noah didn't argue with G-d? Abraham argued with G-d. Moshe argued with G-d, especially when G-d wanted to punish the Jewish people. Why didn't Noah argue with G-d? Where was his sense of compassion? Why didn't he ask G-d for another chance for the people of his generation? This is what bothers the rabbis. In fact, to this day this is still one of the great differences between Judaism and most other religions. Most other religions consider it a great sin to argue with G-d even if they feel that G-d is being too strict and stern. They also feel that when a person is overcome with an irresistible impulse, this must come from G-d and that he must go ahead with it, even if it is of dubious morality.

In Judaism these types of feelings and urges must be resisted. Our actions must be moral and just. We must always have compassion and can even plead with G-d (even though ultimately we have to submit to His will) that he should change His evil decrees. In the case of Moshe Rabbeinu, G-d did change his evil decrees because of Moshe's importuning. Nowhere do we find Noah pleading for his generation to G-d. He does not seem to have this great sense of compassion that is necessary to be a Jewish religious leader. That, of course, is what led to the argument between Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lokesh. Rabbi Yochanan said that Noah could never have that overwhelming sense of compassion. He would never appeal to G-d, even if he lived in a generation like Abraham's. Resh Lokesh said, no, his generation was such a bad generation that he knew that it would be foolish to appeal to G-d, but if he would have lived in Abraham's generation, he would have appealed to G-d. He would have had that overwhelming sense of compassion.

That, the rabbis explain, is why G-d used the rainbow as a sign that He would not bring destruction on the world any more because a rainbow is composed of light and water. It is composed of intellectual insight and tears. In Judaism, when a person is described as being ordained with light, it means that he has an intellectual insight into how the world works. Intellectuals especially of high caliber feel that they have to follow their light, their intellectual insights no matter where it leads them. This, of course, is

what the Communists did. Even if it led to gulags and death, they said that it was okay because that is where that intellectual light led them. The same was especially true of the Nazis. And in Rwanda, it was not just one primitive tribe attacking another primitive tribe. The whole slaughter of 500,000 Tutsis was actually orchestrated from the universities of Rwanda. It was a planned murder that took place based upon certain ideas which overwhelmed the true intellectuals at Rwanda.

Ideals must always be moderated by tears. We must have compassion. Unless we have compassion to moderate our ideals, we will end by building towers of Babel in which the goal becomes much more important than the suffering of human beings and/or will not take into account suffering at all and millions will die. In order to be a great religious leader, we have to have compassion. That is what Judaism teaches, and that was what bothered the rabbis about Noah. Did Noah have that sense of compassion? Some rabbis, like Resh Lokesh, say he definitely did. Some rabbis, like Rabbi Yochanan, said he did not. This argument will continue indefinitely but what is important is the realization that in order to be a true religious leader in the Jewish people, you have to have compassion.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a man who took his girlfriend to the fanciest restaurant, and they ate all sorts of high cholesterol foods with high fat content and all sorts of dainty dishes with high caloric intake and he spend, just between the two of them, \$300. Then he turned to his girlfriend and said, "You know, my doctor would be very disappointed in me tonight." His girlfriend looked at him and said, "Why would your doctor be disappointed in you? Are you on a special diet?" He said, "Oh, no, I owe him a lot of money."

When it comes to life we have to have compassion for others. We cannot just follow the whims of either our emotions or, in the case of intellectuals, the whims of our ideas even if we think that these ideas are ultimately good and sound and just. Instead, we must always moderate our ideas by the tears of compassion. Unless we are really compassionate people, we will not be able to fulfill what G-d wants us to fulfill on earth and that is even to argue with Him sometimes. Compassion must be an overriding concern. Yes, we have to follow our ideas but we must make sure that we apply them compassionately. If we do, then we can rest as-

sured that G-d will help us achieve our ideas so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.