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An Enduring Legacy

These are the offspring of Noach [Noah]. Noach was a tzaddik [righteous man], perfect in relation to his generation. Noach walked with God (Genesis, 6:9).

Why does the Torah state, “These are the offspring of Noach,” and then digress to tell us that “Noach was a *tzaddik*” before informing us of the names of his children?

The commentator *Rashi* explains that this teaches us that “the main offspring of the righteous are their good deeds.” This explains the digression. It reveals that *toldos*, the word for “physical offspring,” can be used to mean “spiritual offspring” as well.

Noach’s attributes and achievements in personal and spiritual growth are referred to as his progeny. Noach is distinguished for having conceived, labored, and given birth to refined spiritual and personal traits. This elevated him to the status of having “walked with God.”

As we examine the analogy of “walking with God,” one may question the use of that particular word. Self-growth and lasting change are gradual processes that develop by taking continued steps forward, much like walking. The word “walk” alludes to a slow but steady moral progression.

The ten generations separating Noach from Adam are characterized by moral failures, plummeting humankind into a downward spiral. They culminated with the Flood, in which all of the inhabitants of Earth were wiped out, with the exception of Noach, his family, and the pairs of animals to replenish the Earth once again.

After the Flood, Noach became the progenitor of humanity. The Torah calls Noach *ish tzaddik*. The Midrash enlightens us with yet a deeper understanding of the juxtaposition of the word “righteous” with the names of Noach’s children. The Torah is telling us that our positive actions are likened to producing offspring. One’s legacy includes his or her worthy deeds.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein elucidates the connection between positive action and offspring. “One should love good deeds the way he or she loves their own children. They should perform them out of love, not mere duty.”

We invest boundless energy and effort in raising our children and helping them to develop their abilities. The Torah equates this with the same effort we, as individuals, should expend in developing our own characters.

Accordingly, we can never give up on ourselves. We are all “works in progress” and never completed. In fact, we must aspire to continually give birth to new and rejuvenated aspects of who we truly are and who we can become. Continual inner refinement is actually being in touch with oneself. Recognizing the depths of one’s latent potential, we can strive to cultivate and to actualize more and more of it. To the extent that our efforts are transformed into positive deeds, we have produced spiritual offspring. These will become our progeny.

One can never underestimate the significance of a kind word or one positive act. Once set into motion, our positive words and actions reverberate forward with a momentum that continues to shape and to affect future generations.

In our challenging times, not all parents are successful in transmitting their cherished values to the next generation. This is not always a poor reflection on the parents, nor an indication of defective parenting. It has become increasingly common to find that disappointing outcomes are more the result of combative and toxic outside

influences infiltrating the minds and hearts of our children. It’s not surprising that many parents are not able to counteract today’s environment.

The Torah provides parents with the opportunity to pause, reflect, and recognize that indeed there is yet another definition and higher purpose for raising ourselves through the process of raising our children. This expansive vantage point is to be gleaned out of what, at first glance, appears to be a digression. An inconsistency in the opening line of the Torah portion is actually a red flag, alerting one to look deeper. Greater meaning and insights lie in wait beneath the surface. They await our discovery and application.

After thorough exploration, the ultimate truth is revealed. Our deeds and what we’ve made of our own characters will become our eternal legacies.

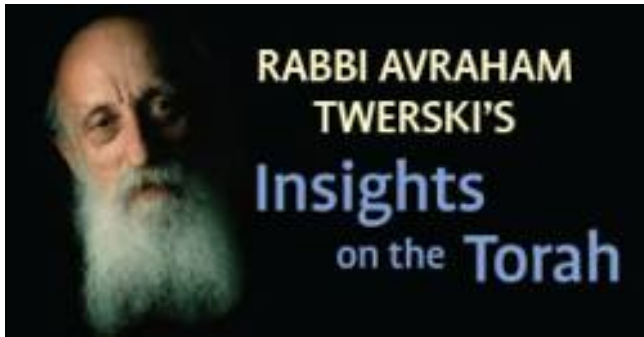
Making it Relevant

1. One’s positive deeds and refinement of character are likened to spiritual offspring and considered one’s actual lasting legacy. Focus on becoming more in touch with your own positive and negative character traits. Where is development most needed?
2. Identify and isolate one positive trait you have worked on and be mindful of maintaining it. What challenges you? What possibly could trigger failure?
3. Identify a negative trait and get to work on transforming it. Daily experiences, provocations, and challenges help to clarify the areas in which we need to grow and improve.
4. Try to better assess and understand that which motivates your positive acts and

choices. What triggers you to fall short or to revert to negative responses?

5. Strive to establish a steady “walking” pace, so that there can be continual momentum and progress forward. Remember that growth is an incremental process. Patience, resilience, and fortitude are required to actualize long-term goals.

Look for and find opportunities for self-growth. They surround you!



Conflicted Belief

Noah with his sons, his wife and his son's wives with him, went into the Ark because of the waters of the flood (Genesis, 7:7).

Rashi comments on the phrase "because of the waters of the flood" that Noah did not enter the Ark until the rising waters of the flood forced him to do so. Why? Because Noah was of diminished faith. He believed yet did not believe that there would be a flood.

The Torah commentaries struggle with Rashi's statement. The Torah describes Noah as being “a perfect *tzaddik*.” How can a perfect *tzaddik* be

lacking in faith? Furthermore, just what is meant by "he believed yet did not believe?" This statement appears to be an internal contradiction.

The Steipler Gaon provides us with an important psychological insight. Knowledge of something can be of two types: There can be an *intellectual* knowledge and an *emotional* knowledge. For example, a person may have a desire for something, and is told to avoid going after it because there is excessive radiation in that area and the exposure is dangerous. If his desire for the object is intense, he may risk the exposure. However, if the object is in a building that is aflame, even an intense desire will not make him risk his life. Why the difference? Because a person does not *see* radiation. One can *understand* that radiation can be dangerous and even lethal, but this is an *intellectual* awareness, which can be overcome by an intense desire. The danger of fire, however, is grasped *emotionally*, and is strong enough to override temptation.

Rashi is not critical of Noah, who was indeed a perfect *tzaddik* and had a complete intellectual faith in the word of God that there would be a flood. Rashi does not say that Noah was *lacking* in faith. Indeed, his faith was complete, but was of a lesser quality because it was only intellectual. This is what is meant by the phrase, "He believed yet did not believe." Noah believed intellectually, but not emotionally. Perhaps Noah was simply incapable of having an emotional awareness, and this limitation was not his fault.

The Steipler Gaon's explanation is of great practical value. I see this regularly in my work treating alcoholics, who typically do not accept

treatment to stop their destructive drinking until they hit rock-bottom, i.e., until they experience a severe crisis which forces them to acknowledge their problem. In my book, *Substance Abusing High Achievers*, I cite cases of people of the highest intellect who *know* that their drinking is destructive, yet are unable to stop. One physician who was the director of a treatment center for alcoholics and who regularly saw the ruination caused by alcohol was himself a heavy drinker. His intellectual awareness of the dangers of drinking was not enough to make him stop.

Billions of dollars have been spent to prevent young people from using drugs. None of the many prevention programs has proven effective. This is because regardless of how much we impress youngsters with the dangers of drugs, they achieve only an intellectual awareness, which is not sufficient to overcome the emotional desire to get "high."

Distraught parents whose child wishes to intermarry desperately try to discourage this move in every possible way. They have the rabbi talk to their child and they may take him or her to a psychologist. Rarely are these efforts successful. The child may *understand* why he should not intermarry, but this intellectual knowledge does not change his mind.

What can be done to prevent young people from self-destructive behavior? Unfortunately, very often nothing can be done. Parents agonize over their powerlessness to prevent their child from harming himself. They can only hope and pray that the child will come to his senses, and this may occur only when the child eventually

experiences the harmful consequences of his actions.

Even Noah, "a perfect *tzaddik*" believed yet did not believe.



Sensitivity to Another's Needs

When the Torah says, "Noah was righteous in his generation," it's sort of a backhanded compliment. Yes, he was righteous, but only in comparison to the people of "his generation," people who were very bad. Noah rose above his surroundings and this is no easy task. But objectively speaking, he wasn't perfectly holy, just much better than the rest.

Another curious thing about the story of the Flood is the necessity for Noah to live on a boat and take care of tons of animals for all that time. If God had wanted, He could have obliterated the world in any manner, in a millisecond. Why does God torture Noah by forcing him to live this way, constantly caring for all these species with all their different and various needs for the entire year that Noah was on the Ark?

Perhaps there was something lacking in Noah's character that was being fixed by this situation.

OPEN YOUR HAND

The verse in Psalms 145:16 says, "You (God) open Your hand, and satisfy the desire of every living thing." What is the metaphor of the "open hand"?

When the hand is closed, it appears as if all the fingers are the same size. When the hand is open, we see they are slightly different.

God notices the needs of each individual living thing. They are not bottles in a factory.

By forcing Noah to take care of all these animals, God was getting him to notice the needs of the individual. Each animal needs something different, requiring different types of food and at different times. Through the difficulty of the labor involved, Noah's character was molded into a sensitive caregiver.

EMULATE GOD

There are many commandments in the Torah, both dos and don'ts. Some are easy to relate to and some are more difficult. One in particular is very baffling - the command to be like the Almighty (see Deuteronomy 28:9). Who are we to imitate the Divine? Yet this is what He demands.

There are many ways to come close to the Infinite; in fact all the commandments do this to a greater or a lesser extent. Each and every mitzvah is a path or element of Godliness that we emulate by fulfilling the command. But what about this specific mitzvah to "be like God"?

One way is to focus on what the Psalmist accentuated. Just as God notices the needs of each individual being, so too we should try to develop this same sensitivity and desire to give.

RIGHTEOUSNESS = SENSITIVITY

"A righteous person knows the personality of his animal." (Proverbs 12:10)

To be sensitive to another is not always easy, especially if we don't speak the same language. It takes extra intuition, and the ability to notice tiny details. It also takes the desire to want to know another's needs.

For those of us who are oblivious, Jewish law tells us to feed our animal before we feed ourselves. If we were sensitive, we'd do that naturally. Our animal is dependent on us, so we should take care of its needs before ours. That's common sense...

CHATTER OF DATE PALMS

Great sages from the Talmudic era (100 B.C.E. - 200 C.E.) like Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai were said to be able to understand the "chatter of date palms." This sensitivity might be thought of as a little far-fetched, unless you've seen the research of *The Secret Life of Plants* by Tompkins and Bird.

Numerous scientific experiments have detected a form of expression and emotions in plants. They "scream," even though we cannot hear it. But if you were truly in tune with the plant, you should be able to sense it.

I have a friend who has lots of plants, and each one has a name. She says the plants tell her things

like "I want water" or "I need sun." Is my friend deluded, or does she have a highly developed sensitivity that allows her to "hear" their needs?

IGNORE THE BARRIERS

The world of the spirit is very different from our physical world. We see definitions and division, and are comfortable with labels that separate us from others. Reform, Conservative, Orthodox. Black. White. Asian. American. French.

At the soul level, we are all one. There are no barriers.

When we develop a sensitivity to look past the superficial and at the deeper needs, we become more like the Infinite. We are able to see what the eye does not see. Practice this habit of trying to ascertain a deeper level of understanding with people, animals, or even plants. You will become adept at many areas of spiritual concern.

Spiritual Exercise:

This week, pick one person and ask your intuition: *What are one or two of this person's deeper needs? What is he seeking? What does he want out of life?*

It will open up a beautiful window to the soul.



When Righteousness Isn't Enough

Noah: an island of righteousness in an ocean of wickedness; a lone beacon of morality in a world gone mad. And yet, do we celebrate Noah as one of the forefathers? Do we look at him as the model of human being we aspire to achieve? No. In fact, most commentaries look at the story of Noah as a cautionary tale. A tale that shows us that sometimes, righteousness just isn't enough. But where, exactly, did Noah fall short? And what more could be expected of a man who achieved remarkable personal righteousness in a generation of utter depravity?

Our first clue that there's more here than meets the eye is the transformation in how the Torah describes Noah. We meet him as an "*Ish Tzaddik*" - a righteous man. Yet by the end of his life, the Torah calls him an "*Ish Adama*" - a man of the ground. Consider, in contrast, the arc of Moses, who is first introduced as "*Ish Mitzri*" - a man of Egypt, yet at the end of his life, God describes him as an "*Ish Elohim*" - a man of God. What could these shifts in title indicate about these two protagonists?

Even more telling is how the Torah describes Noah's relationship with the Divine: "Noah walked with God." Yet of Avraham, it says he "walked before God." Rashi, the greatest of all Torah commentators, explains this contrast pointedly: Noah relied on God like a crutch, whereas Avraham "drew his moral strength from himself and walked in his righteousness by his own effort" (Bereishis 6:9).

Perhaps most startling, though, is what we find in the Haftara for Parshas Noach. Isaiah refers to the flood as "*Mei Noach*" - the Waters of Noah (Isaiah 54:9). The commentators interpret these words with ruthless literalism; Noah caused the Flood - were it not for Noah's failures, his generation would've been spared. How could we possibly blame the flood on Noah? He did exactly what God asked!

Let's use these clues to discover what led to Noah's downfall.

As we saw above, Rashi contrasts Noah's walking with God to Avraham's walking before God. When we compare the lives of Noah and Avraham, we see dramatically different paths of leadership. When God reveals His plan to destroy humanity, Noah builds an ark. Though God gave him 120 years to complete this task - years that Rashi tells us were meant for Noah to influence his generation toward repentance - he failed to save even a single soul beyond his family. Avraham, in contrast, dedicated his life to reaching out to others. He opened his tent to weary travelers, gave them food and shelter, and taught them the ways of God. As the Alshich, a 16th century Kabbalist of Tzfat, explains,

"Noah was personally righteous but did not teach others as Avraham did. If his sons had not been worthy of salvation in their own right, he could not have saved them, just as he was unable to save even the children of his contemporaries."

But the most telling contrast between Noah and Avraham was Avraham's response when God shared His intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Unlike Noah, Avraham boldly negotiated, pleading for the cities to be spared if even a handful of righteous people could be found.

We see a similar theme when we compare the life of Noah to the life of Moses. As we mentioned earlier, Noah descended from an "*Ish Tzaddik*" to an "*Ish HaAdama*". Noah's fall from righteousness reaches rock bottom when, after exiting the ark, God gives Noah and his children the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply and populate the earth." Instead of fulfilling God's will, Noah's first action is to plant a vineyard, make wine, and drink himself into a stupor. According to the Midrash, the gruesome end to this story is that one of Noah's sons, Cham, finds him comatose in the tent and castrates him. Whether literal or not, we draw an essential lesson from Noah's castration; at a time where the world desperately needed optimism and new life, Noah indulged in self-centered escapism. Measure for measure, Noah's son castrated him; "If you don't use it, you lose it."

On the other side of the spectrum, Moses rose from an "*Ish Mitzri*" to an "*Ish Elohim*". When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the first set of tablets, he found the Jewish people

worshipping the Golden Calf. Outraged, he destroys the idol and punishes the people for their wickedness. But when God proposes to wipe out the nation and start anew with Moses alone - offering him the same opportunity given to Noah - Moses takes the exact opposite approach. He puts his own life on the line, pleading for mercy on behalf of his people and compelling them toward repentance.

Despite his flaws, we can certainly empathize with Noah. He achieved complete piety in a generation of complete perversion. Even his decision to indulge in wine to numb the pain of walking out to a world of complete destruction and desolation is one we can relate to as painfully human. He was a great man. But he failed his mission as a leader. Because of his failure to lead, the great flood became known as the “Waters of Noah”. Unlike Noah, Avraham, the progenitor of our people, and Moses, the leader of our nation, transcended personal righteousness and risked everything before God to save those for whom they felt responsible. Unlike Noah, Avraham and Moses became the heroes we all aspire to be.

There's a telling story about Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar Movement. When someone came to tell him about a man who he felt qualified as one of the 36 hidden tzaddikim of the generation, Rabbi Yisrael responded, "In this generation, I don't believe someone can be hidden and still be a tzaddik."

In the *Ethics of Our Fathers*, a book of 2000-year-old wisdom from our sages, Rabbi Hillel the Elder teaches, "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." The message resonates across

millennia: where leadership abounds, focus on personal growth, but where there is no one else teaching and leading the generation, you must step forward and become that leader.

This week, make time to do a self-accounting. Ask yourself: Where am I meant to work on my personal righteousness and where does God need me to step up and serve His people? Our nation is more in need of Jewish leaders and activists than ever before. I encourage you to find those opportunities where there are no men and be the man (or woman) that the situation requires of you.

May we be blessed to grow together through the difficulties of our times, to unite as a nation, and to bring about a world filled with more peace and blessing as a result!

The Talmud (Succah 45B) tells us that in each generation, there are 36 righteous people whose good deeds hold up the world

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