

Parashat Noach 5781, 2020:

Who Was Noach?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The penultimate verses of Parashat Bereishit present us with dire foreboding:

And the L-rd saw that the evil of man was great in the earth, and every imagination of his heart was only evil all the time. And the L-rd regretted that He had made man upon the earth, and He became grieved in His heart. And the L-rd said, “I will blot out man, whom I created, from upon the face of the earth, from man to cattle to creeping thing, to the fowl of the heavens, for I regret that I made them.” (6:5-7, these and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The final *pasuk*, however, offers us a ray of hope: “*v’Noach matza chane b’einai Hashem* — But Noah found favor in the eyes of the L-rd.” (6:8) Why did Noah find favor in the “eyes of the L-rd,” and what was so unique about him? The first verse in our *parasha* provides the answer: “These are the generations of Noah; *Noach ish tzaddik haya b’dorotav* — Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; *et heElokim hithalech Noach* — Noah walked with G-d.” (6:9) There are two reasons why Noah was different in kind and degree from the rest of the people of his time: *Noach ish tzaddik haya b’dorotav* and *et heElokim hithalech Noach*; as a result, *Noach matza chane b’einai Hashem*.

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on a variety of Rabbinic sources, cites the well-known argument regarding Noah’s true persona:

in his generations: Some of our Sages interpret it [*b’dorotav*] favorably: How much more

so if he had lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have been even more righteous. Others interpret it derogatorily: In comparison with his generation he was righteous, but if he had been in Abraham's generation, he would not have been considered of any importance.

The positive approach focuses on who Noach was in an absolute sense, rather than who he was in comparison to others. As many *meforshim* (commentators) note, his name is comprised of the Hebrew letters *nun and chet*, which, when reversed, spell the word “*chane*” (grace). In other words, in his very being, Noach was an *ish tzaddik*. In stark contrast, the oft-quoted negative approach suggests that Noach was essentially “a nobody,” and that only in the darkness and depravity of his time did he appear righteous.

Like Rashi, the Ramban (1194-1270) analyzes the expression *b'dorotav*, in his generations.

After citing Rashi's words, he suggests his own interpretation:

In my view, the most satisfying explanation, according to the simple meaning, is that he [Noach] was *hatzadik b'dorot hahame* — the only righteous person in those generations; there wasn't a righteous or *tamim* — perfect person in his generation besides him. Similarly, “For it is you [Noach] that I have seen to be *tzadik* — righteous before Me in this generation” (7:1) — there was no one else that was worthy of being saved in that generation. It states “in his generations” because many generations had passed since the time people began to corrupt their ways, and there was no righteous person on earth except for him. (Translation, https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban_on_Genesis.6.9.1?lang=bi with my emendations)

It appears that the Rambam is adopting the “*chane* hypothesis” as cited above, namely, that Noach was an authentic *tzadik* and *tamim* in his own right. This is borne out by his earlier comment on *Noach ish tzadik haya*:

The verse mentions that Noah was *zakkai v'shalame b'tzidko* — free of guilt and complete in his righteousness, to let us know that he deserved to be saved from the deluge because he didn't deserve any punishment at all, for he was *tamim b'tzedek* — perfect in righteousness. The word “*tzadik*” refers to someone who is righteous in judgment, the opposite of “*rasha*,” an evil individual...

In sum, the portrait of Noach that emerges from the Ramban's presentation is a person who

was *tamim b'tzedek* in every sense of the term. As such, he was the ideal person to continue the human race in the coming postdiluvian world.

Closer to our own time, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), in his *Commentary on the Torah*, examines the expression *matza chane b'einai Hashem* in a manner that complements the Ramban's presentation:

A person who has found favor in the eyes of Hashem has achieved the highest level of perfection — for such an individual is able to [intellectually and spiritually] come close before Hashem. As we find in reference to Moshe: “In order that I will find grace in Your eyes.” (*Sefer Shemot* 33:13)...Note that the text does not say, “before Hashem,” rather it states, “*b'einai Hashem.*” If a person is so worthy that Hashem will shed His grace upon him, he has found *chane* in His eyes. (This and the following translation from the Hebrew my own)

Rav Hirsch continues his analysis and, in so doing, equates Noach with Moshe and the Jewish people:

The expression, “*matza chane,*” is found solely in regard to those whom Hashem has graced with extraordinary virtues and unique abilities so that they may achieve the most lofty and exceptional of all goals. We find this in reference to Moshe and the Jewish people. As the text states: “*matza chane ba'midbar* — they found grace in the desert.” (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 31:1) This is the case, as well, regarding Noach whose entire generation destroyed its proper path and was judged for complete destruction; yet, he was fitting in the eyes of Hashem to be utilized as the foundation for all future salvation. [In sum,] everything that Hashem's “heart” sought to find in mankind was inherent in Noach. [As a result, the Almighty] tasked him with saving all life that was good and bringing it forth into the future.

For Rav Hirsch, Noach, like Moshe and the Jewish people, was graced by Hashem “with extraordinary virtues and unique abilities” that provided him with the potential to be “the foundation for all future salvation.” Moreover, “everything that Hashem's ‘heart’ sought to find in mankind was inherent in Noach.” In my estimation, this concept is inspiring beyond words, for we, after all, are the descendants of Noach and his children and thereby carry the potential for greatness of spirit and action. As *David HaMelech* so beautifully

said: “What is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should be mindful of him? You have made him slightly less than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and majesty.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 8:6) With Hashem’s help may we ever use our potential “*l’takane ha’olam b’malchut Sha-dai* — to perfect the world under the kingship of the Almighty.” (*Aleinu*) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.