

פרשת נח

Every so often, a people is described as being “once-in-a-generation,” be it a talented athlete, a silver-tongued orator, or a tremendous *talmid chacham*. One of the most prominent lines of this week’s parsha is in a similar vein, a phrase from the very first pasuk: “אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו”¹ a *righteous man, blameless in his generation*, to which the Ramban explains as Noach being the only righteous person in his era.² Rashi famously provides two different interpretations to the expression “תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו”³. On one hand, this is a compliment, for if Noach had lived in a generation of *tzadikim* instead of one overflowing with sin and iniquity, he would have been an even more righteous person. However, this can also be viewed as a disparaging pejorative: Noach is only seen as righteous in his own generation, yet if he had been placed in Avraham’s generation, he would be considered lacking in moral status and stature.

In the commentary *Toras Moshe*, the Chasam Sofer⁴ integrates these contrasting opinions with a beautiful insight, explaining that both statements of Rashi are true. If Noach had been situated in the generation of Avraham Avinu with the same level of righteousness, he would have lost all prominence, relegated to the status of an average person. However, just as Noach was able to rise to a level of piety in his own era, so too he would have ascended to an even greater echelon of integrity in Avraham’s generation; simply put, he possessed an incredible ability to transcend the status quo of his generation and achieve even higher heights.

In fact, this remark reflects an argument found at the end of *Maseches Sanhedrin* regarding Noach’s righteousness:⁵ Rav Yochanan says that Noach was only seen as great because of the relative moral depravity of his contemporaries, while Reish Lakish says that it is precisely this contrast that Noach is considered righteous: his rectitude despite being surrounded by universal corruption is what made him great, and all the more so would he have been considered virtuous in other generations.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch provides a similar comment,⁶ remarking that both statements are true: while yes, Noach was righteous specifically in relation to his generation, his moral excellence during such an era was nonetheless remarkable. The struggle of remaining upright during a period of such perversion surely must have had a debilitating impact on Noach’s mental and psychological well-being, yet his perseverance in pursuing righteousness bore tremendous weight in the eyes of Hashem, and the circumstantial quality of his actions overrode the lower relative quantity of measure. For this reason, says Rav Hirsch, the word “בְּדֹרֹתָיו” follows the adjective “תָּמִים” and not “צַדִּיק,” for it is much more difficult to remain moral in a time of immorality than to remain flawless in an era of corruption.

In his commentary on prayer in *Olas Reiyah*,⁷ Rav Kook makes a sharp observation on the line “אלוקי עד שלא נוצרתי איני כדאי” which is said in Vidui at the end of Shemoneh Esrei on Yom Kippur:

¹ בראשית ו: ט

² רש"י בראשית ו: ט ד"ה בדורותיו

³ רמב"ן בראשית ו: ט ד"ה בדורותיו

⁴ תורת משה בראשית פרק ו ד"ה היה בדורותיו

⁵ סנהדרין קח.

⁶ רש"ר הירש בראשית פרק ו ד"ה בדורותיו

⁷ הרא"ה קוק, עולת ראיה ב, תפילת יום כיפור, אחרי הוידוי

since a person was not created until that time, it is a sign that they were needed for that exact moment; every single person in history is born into their respective generation at a specific moment because they have a purpose to fulfill at that very point in time. This is why Noach was placed into his generation: not to be compared to the relative righteousness of his later descendants, but rather because he needed to be the one to serve as a "צדיק" & "איש תמים" during that time; in his era, he was the Chosen One. To a certain extent, each of us is considered to be a "Chosen One" on an individual level. For a very unique reason, HaKadosh Baruch Hu decided that we need to be in this world, during this time, and that it was כדאי for us to be created; it is up to us to figure out why, as well as strive to emulate Noach's pursuit of virtuosity in an era of polarization, moral ambiguity, and cultural deviance. Hopefully, we can follow in Noach's footsteps, and succeed in our aspiration to be תמימים בדורינו.