

## **Spanning the Generations**

**Rabbi Maury Grebenau**

A perusal through the Midrashim regarding Noach show two very clear approaches to his character. The midrashim tend to paint extreme pictures of Noach's character. Most famous are the two opinions quoted by Rashi on the first pasuk in our parsha. The Torah tells us that Noach was an '*ish tamim hayah b'dorosav*' – 'a righteous man, perfect in his generation.' Rashi tells us that the word 'generation' is meant to qualify Noach's righteousness. Either it means that he would have been far more righteous in a different generation or he would have been much less of a standout in a different generation. As if these two approaches weren't divergent enough, we find even starker difference. One madrash tells us that Noach served as the role model for Avrohom's famous kindness. Another Midrash informs us that Noach is only slightly better than the rest of this generation and was only saved through the good graces of Hashem. How could two such different opinions of one person appear in the same collection of Midrashim? What does the Midrash seek to teach us with such different perspectives?

One of the foci of Midrash in general is to have us take a closer look at the text. The Midrash expresses ambivalence towards Noach which stems from the very text. We have two major incidents in the Torah where Noach is the central figure. Before the flood he is the savior of the world as we know it. After the flood he gets drunk and seems an altogether different person. The profoundly different pictures in the Midrash simply ask us to take a deeper look at the Noach of the text. In the end who is Noach, does he remain the righteous individual we meet at the outset of the parsha or is he a once great person who fell to a low point and then obscurity?

Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (Mesech Chochma) has an amazing insight which paints Noach in a very interesting light. He focuses on the word '*dosav*' which is plural. The pasuk really reads that Noach was righteous in his generations. The Ibn Ezra points out this anomaly as well, commenting that it is truly appropriate since Noach lived in two different generations. Although the Torah's narrative shifts elsewhere, Noach in fact lives many years after the flood, dying when Avrohom was 58. Noach lives in two distinct generations: antediluvian and postdiluvian. Rav Meir Simcha adds that each of the two descriptors of Noach's character used in the first pasuk refer to these different time periods. In the time period before the flood Noach's most impressive quality was '*tamim*'; he was wholesome enough not to engage in the debauchery which was going on around him. However, after the flood it was tzaddik which was the more impressive quality. Rashi (Avodah Zorah 6a) explains that this refers to Noach's humility.

Rav Meir Simcha seems to understand the first line of Noach to be a positive statement about the whole of Noach's life. Both before the flood when he was righteous enough to be saved in a world steeped in immorality and after when he lived in a generation which began to repopulate the Earth. In this second life of Noach, it was Noach's humility which was so impressive. Noach and his family were the only ones who deserved to be saved from an entire

generation. Noach could easily have become complacent in his spirituality and could have lived out his life resting on the laurels of his previous accomplishments. Perhaps this is exactly what occurred when Noach exited the ark and became drunk. However, Rav Meir Simcha tells us that Noach recovered. He was still called a tzaddik in the second half of his life. Noach was able to continue in his humility, recognizing his need to grow and strive in his service of Hashem.

It is very easy to slip into judging ourselves against the accomplishments of our neighbors. Instead of striving for our personal best we can just look to be better than the person to our left in shul or in the cubicle to the right at work. It was the quality of always striving for personal best that allowed Noach to be considered a Tzaddik even in the second half of his life. This is the aspect of humility which is so fundamental to each of us in our service of Hashem. If we always measure ourselves against our own potential instead of against the level of others, our growth will never cease.