

NOACH

TRANSCENDING THE SELF

The story of Noach is as contemporary as it is ancient. It is more than a dramatic tale from centuries past: it is a story filled with lessons for our lives today. What about the story resonates with us? Does our generation have the same character flaws as Noach's? If so, how do we begin a process of *tikkun*, of repairing the flaws that brought about the near destruction of the world?

As our *parashah* opens, we read, “*Vayomer Elokim leNoach, Keitz kol basar ba lefanai ki malah ha'aretz chamas mipneihem vebineni mashchisam es ha'aretz*” (God said to Noach, “The end of all flesh is coming before Me, because the earth has become filled with corruption from before them, and behold I am destroying them with the earth”).¹ God tells Noach that because the world is filled with *chamas* (corruption), a flood will come to wipe out mankind. It is hard to fathom how an entire generation could have lived in God's pristine world and defiled it with such abandon. Furthermore, what is it about *chamas* that the punishment that awaits it is complete annihilation?

¹ *Bereishis* 6:13.

There is, however, one righteous man in this world of corrupt individuals: “*Noach ish tzaddik* (Noach a righteous man).”² Noach and his family follow God’s command and prepare an ark that will not only sustain their lives, but the lives of hundreds of animals as well. These innocents will be granted entry into the new world after the Flood.

Although the Torah seems to praise Noach, we find that our Sages disagree about the righteousness of Noach, the man who builds this new world. Rashi there cites two divergent interpretations of our Sages: one is that Noach, if he had lived in the generation of Avraham *Avinu*, would have been considered righteous as well, and the other, that his righteous status was only in comparison to his generation.

What was the essence of the generation’s sin? Why would Noach, who seems to be described in the Torah as righteous and perfect, not have been held on as high a pedestal had he existed in a different era? And what can we glean today from our rich history to help perfect our own moral fiber?

Destructive Taking

Let us try to understand the depth and intensity of the sins perpetrated by Noach’s generation.

“*Vatishacheis ha’aretz lifnei haElokim vatimalei ha’aretz chamas* (the earth became corrupted before God and the earth became filled with corruption).”³ Rashi there interprets the word *chamas* as *gezeq*: robbery. Robbing is an anti-social and dishonest act. No one can live for long in a society where one’s belongings are not safe,

² *Bereishis* 6:9.

³ *Bereishis* 6:11.

knowing that they can vanish if one turns one's back. But does the sin of robbery warrant such a severe punishment? What is it about robbery that can bring about the destruction of the world?

The Slonimer Rebbe answers⁴ this question. Noach's generation embraced corruption. Corrupt behavior cannot be contained or limited; it always spreads. The act of stealing personal property was only the beginning of the downfall for the people of Noach's time. Normally, stealing is accepted as a wrongful act. However, the more they stole, the more it became accepted. Eventually stealing became the norm and the intrinsic concepts of right and wrong were overturned. When civilization flirts with immorality, intolerable behavior is suddenly tolerated.

So it was in the time of Noach. When stealing became acceptable, God knew the seams of the world were on their way to coming apart. He therefore had to destroy the world and start again.

Onkelos, in his Aramaic translation of the Torah, sees another dimension of the sins of Noach's era. He translates the word *chamas* as *chatofim*: grabbers. He implies that the people of this generation not only stole without conscience, but did so only to satisfy their own desires. They were not, for example, stealing bread to feed their children. No one ever thought about anyone else; their only concern was about being good to themselves.

Still, we can ask: Does the punishment of annihilation fit the crime? How can we understand the Flood on a deeper level?

An interesting *midrash*⁵ describes the meeting of Avraham *Avinu* (our father) and Shem, the son of Noach. Our Sages tell us that Avraham *Avinu* met Shem, one of the survivors of the Flood,

⁴ *Nesivos Shalom, Bereishis*, p. 48-49.

⁵ *Midrash Shocheh Tov, Tebillim* 37.

and asked him: What allowed you to withstand the Flood? While the ark provided you with physical protection, what gave you the emotional and psychological stamina to live through this catastrophe? Shem answered: We were saved from the Flood because during that year we were involved in *chesed* (acts of loving-kindness). We spent a whole year feeding animals. That is what saved us – that year of giving.

Our Sages explain that the people in the ark did not sleep most of that year. After all, there were only eight of them and hundreds of animals. There were nocturnal animals that had to be fed at night, ferocious animals that would sometimes harm their caretakers, and temperamental animals that needed special attention. Noah's small family spent an entire year giving and giving and giving again. And this is what saved them. *Chesed* was the remedy to the fatal spiritual ailment of that generation. The people had become so degenerate from taking without giving, that the world could not continue. God offered Noah and his family a chance to live, but only by confining them to a situation where they were forced to give without compensation.

Real Kindness

The Rambam defines *chesed* in his *Moreh Nevuchim*,⁶ based on his commentary on *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of the Fathers). There are two kinds of giving. There is the giving to people with whom we have no relationship and the giving to people with whom we do have a relationship. *Chesed*, as a higher level of giving, denotes giving to those with whom we have no relationship, or giving beyond our due to those to whom we are already connected.

⁶ *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:53.

The definition of our relationship is what makes the distinction between *chesed* (acts of loving-kindness) and *emes* (truth). The distinction can be understood from the second chapter in *sefer Yehoshua*. Rachav, the Canaanite woman who saved the lives of the two Jewish spies at the risk of her own life, asks them a favor: she requests that since she did a *chesed* with them that they do *chesed* with her family and spare them. When the spies commit to her request, they say that they will do “*chesed ve’emes*.”

On this difference in terminology, the Radak comments⁷ that *chesed* is an act that is above and beyond what we are obligated to do in a situation. Rachav calls her kindness to the spies *chesed*, as it was kindness done having had no prior relationship with them. They say that they will do *chesed* with her family, as toward them they have no obligation, but *emes* with her, being as they were already obligated to her.

If a friend who usually helps you out calls to ask for a ride because her car is being repaired, you should say yes. But this is not an act of *chesed*; it is an act of *emes*, as ethical behavior demands that if someone you know who has helped you in the past needs help, you give it. On the other hand, if you help someone you do not know, this is an act of *chesed*. For, not having a prior relationship with him means that you have no expectations and therefore it is a true act of *chesed*. Similarly, if your friend needs you to take her to the doctor and you not only drive her there, but go to the pharmacy with her afterwards, this might also be an act of *chesed* if this act exceeds what would usually be expected of you. Thus, *chesed* is about doing a kindness for someone we do not know or going above and beyond for someone we do.

⁷ Commentary on *Yehoshua* 2:12.

Most of us score one hundred percent in the area of *emes*. We do for our friends what we hope will be done for us. But this is not *chesed*; it is *emes*. What we call *chesed* – the above-and-beyond kind of giving – is more difficult.

What is the source in the Torah obligating us to do *chesed*? There are two.

In *Hilchos Aveilus*,⁸ the Rambam teaches us that doing acts of kindness such as *bikkur cholim* (visiting the sick), *nichum aveilim* (comforting the mourners) and *bachnasas kallah* (escorting the bride) is based on the concept of *ve'ahavta lere'acha kamocho* (love your fellow like yourself). However, if this were the only foundation of *chesed*, kindness would be considerably limited. If *chesed* is based solely on the concept of *kamocho* (like yourself), then when there is a conflict between the self and the other, the self will win out.

For example, if you are asked to host a guest when you are not feeling well, you might say that it is not a good time, and offer to do it another time. Although you would like to have guests, since you appreciate it when people host you, kindness based on *kamocho* will lead you to put your needs first. The self is in conflict with the *chesed* that is waiting to be done.

Our Sages tell us that the story of Ruth was written to teach us about the reward for *gemilus chasadim* (performing acts of kindness). But Ruth's story is much deeper than that. It not only instructs us about how to do *chesed*, but brings examples of those who failed to do it properly.

In the beginning of this *megillah* (literally, scroll; one of five short books in the Bible) we learn about Elimelech, a wealthy man

⁸ *Hilchos Aveilus* 14:1.

who lived in Israel at the time of a famine. How does Elimelech react to the ordeal of the famine? He picks up and moves away. He reasons that his poor relatives will surely come knocking at his door with outstretched baskets, asking for food. If he gives to them all, he figures, he will eventually be impoverished too. Enough is enough, he thinks. And, so that he will not have to answer all the needy people who are sure to come knocking, he leaves town.

At the end of the story, we meet another egotist: a potential redeemer given the opportunity to redeem the name of Ruth's deceased husband who died without heirs. By marrying Ruth and having a child with her, he could have helped to carry on the name of the deceased. He chose, however, not to do this *mitzvah* (commandment). He said that a marriage to Ruth would tarnish his family name. Like Elimelech, he put himself first. Because of "self" limitations, he missed great opportunities, in contrast to Boaz who put his "self" aside and married Ruth, ultimately leading to the birth of David *HaMelech* (King David).

There is another source for *chesed* – this time a *chesed* that has no restrictions, and is therefore a higher level of kindness. It is based on the verse in *Devarim*: "Walk after Hashem, your God, and fear Him and obey His commandments and listen to His voice and serve Him and cling to Him."⁹ This sounds deceptively easy; but how easy is it to do so, really?

And, indeed, our Sages ask¹⁰ about this verse: "Is it possible for one to walk after the Divine Presence? Has it not been written, 'For Hashem your God is an all-consuming fire'¹¹?" The answer

⁹ *Devarim* 13:5.

¹⁰ *Sotah* 14a.

¹¹ *Devarim* 4:24.

they give is that we can follow His ways. Just as God is involved in clothing the naked and visiting the sick and burying the dead, so should we be involved in such acts.

This is a level of *chesed* superior to the one based on loving another like ourselves. And the role model for it is Avraham *Avinu*. On the third day after his *bris milah* (circumcision), Avraham *Avinu* was in a lot of pain. But what did he do on that day? He sat outside his tent looking for visitors that he could host. It was the hottest part of the day. He was in agony. He was not a young man. Yet he involved himself completely in *chesed*, caring for his guests. He loved *chesed*, not because it was convenient for him, but because he loved *chesed*. He had every right to rest, but his was a way of walking after God. The *Yalkut Lekach Tov* writes¹² that Avraham *Avinu's* *chesed* was “*mitoch emunah baHashem* (out of faith in God).” His motivations were *leshem Shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven), not just to relieve his feelings of compassion. We too should do kindness not just to relieve our discomfort, so that we do not feel bad, but in order to emulate God. Just as God shines on the entire world without distinction, so too should we do *chesed* broadly. This is the goal: to do all acts of *chesed* without excuses, and to raise ourselves to a level where we seek it out without the limitations of self.

This is the distinction between levels of *chesed*. One is based on *kamocho* and the other on following God. How do we move from the level of loving others like ourselves, to the level of a Ruth who was prepared to sacrifice honor, riches, even comfort – and essentially overcome the self – to be with her holy mother-in-law and learn from her ways? The answer is simple – by doing *chesed* itself; because when we get involved with *chesed*, we grow.

¹² *Yalkut Lekach Tov, Bamidbar*, p. 51.

The Power to Build Worlds

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe gives¹³ us an idea of what *chesed* is all about. When the *nachash* (snake) wanted to convince Chavah to eat from the forbidden fruit, he said, “And you will be like God.”¹⁴ Our Sages explain that the snake meant that Chavah would be like God in her ability to create worlds. Chavah was seduced by this idea and in turn changed the makeup of all reality.

Don’t we all want to create? And how can we indeed get this power to build worlds? The answer lies not in the *Eitz Hada’as* (the Tree of Knowledge), but in *chesed*.

Any act of kindness is an act of building, of giving life to the lowly. Even a small act builds up the worlds of the people around you. Rabbi Wolbe writes¹⁵ that the directive to do *chesed* can be derived from studying the section regarding the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* (charity) in the Torah.

The subject of charity, giving to the poor, is found in *Devarim*: “If there shall be among you a destitute person... you shall not harden your heart and you shall not close your hand against your destitute brother. Rather, you shall surely open your hand to him and you shall surely lend him *asher yechsar lo* (enough for his lacking that he lacks).”¹⁶ That is the key.

Rashi comments¹⁷ that the commandment of “*asher yechsar lo*” means that although you are not obligated to make him rich, you should give him what he lacks according to his individual needs,

¹³ *Alei Shur*, vol. 2, p. 198.

¹⁴ *Bereishis* 3:5.

¹⁵ *Alei Shur*, Ibid.

¹⁶ *Devarim* 15:7-8.

¹⁷ Commentary on *Devarim* 15:8.

“even a horse to ride upon and a servant to run before him.” Someone who was wealthy and has lost everything cannot subsist on the same amount of money as one who has been poor all of his life. Rashi mentions that finding someone unmarried a wife is also included in this commandment.

Rabbi Wolbe points out that there is no universal standard of *chesed*. *Chesed* is dependent on the individual’s needs. If we want to be involved in *chesed*, in building worlds, we must find out what “**he** lacks” – the personal needs of that individual, everything that he in particular lacks. Every person is a world unto himself. If one person’s world has a sun and a second person gives him another, then his world is out of balance. However, if a person is missing a moon and the second person provides him with one – he has just completed that person’s universe.

On the phrase “you shall surely open up your hand,” it is said in the name of the Vilna Gaon that when the hand is closed, every finger appears the same size. When our hand is open, however, each finger is a slightly different length. When we give, we have to give according to the need. Some will need money, some a job, some advice, some spiritual guidance or support. We cannot relate to everyone on the same level. If we want to do real *chesed*, says Rabbi Wolbe,¹⁸ we have to work on developing the skill of reading other people. We have to know what each person is missing.

Sometimes this missing element is not so obvious.

There is a famous story told about a woman who asked the *Beis HaLevi* if it is permissible to use four cups of milk instead of wine at the Pesach *Seder*. The rabbi then instructed his *shamash* (assistant) to give the woman a considerable sum of money. Why?

¹⁸ *Alii Shur*, vol. 2, p. 199.

Because the rabbi understood from the woman's question that not only could she not afford wine, but also meat – otherwise she would not have been suggesting having milk at the *Seder*. By listening, he discovered her particular needs. That is how to give a person what he is missing.

There was an old lady in Jerusalem who would sit on the same bench at a certain bus stop for hours, on most days. She never smiled and just kept her hand out, still like a statue. Most people ignored her. When she received a handout, she did not say thank you. So neglected and disheveled was she that it was uncomfortable to look at her.

One day, someone decided to be concerned about this woman. He found out that it was not only money that she needed. He spoke to her and then made a plan. He brought her clothes to his own home to be washed. When he discovered how filthy her house was – clearly, it had not been cleaned in months – he cleaned it. Eventually, he connected her with a social worker who could help her more profoundly. His *chesed* required seeing behind her blank stare and motionless body. We rarely ask directly for what we need. Sometimes we are too proud to ask.

In his series of classes on *chesed*, Rabbi Wolbe would assign his students homework. His students were to work on discovering the needs of others in their daily lives. After a few weeks, they would gather to report on what they found.

Most described learning how unaware they had been until now of the needs of the people around them. When they enumerated those newly discovered needs, however, Rabbi Wolbe saw a pattern in the kinds of needs that his students reported. He realized that each student saw in his family and friends only those needs that the student himself had. He was

simply seeing in others a reflection of himself. He had reached only the first level of *chesed*: “*kamocho*,” and when the ego, the *kamocho*, is too large, we can only see the other through our own experiences. But if we want to truly give, we must see what the other is missing. This is possible only if we take a step back and practice the second level of *chesed*.

In order to sidestep the ego and sensitize ourselves to others, Rabbi Wolbe recommends¹⁹ working on *he'aras panim*: noticing and focusing on the needs of another. This is a *middah* (character trait) of Hashem. The Torah describes the first step towards the redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt as “God saw the Children of Israel and God knew.”²⁰ Rashi there comments that the phrase “God knew” indicated that God paid attention; He did not ignore what He saw. Moshe merited being the redeemer because he too paid attention to and empathized with the Jewish people’s suffering: “...he went out to his brothers and he saw their suffering.”²¹

The first step towards developing this *middah* of *he'aras panim*, according to Rabbi Wolbe, is greeting people as if we are really interested in them. We cannot greet everyone the same way; it has to be personalized. Everyone needs something different. By really paying attention to the needs and concerns of the person before us, we develop sensitivity to that person. We all say: “Hello. How are you?” More effective is: “Hello. How was your reunion?” “Hello. How is the work on your house coming along?” “Hello. How is your child doing, the one who was having difficulty in school?” With this focus, we are

¹⁹ *Alei Shur*, vol. 2, p. 200.

²⁰ *Shemos* 2:25.

²¹ *Shemos* 2:11.

dealing with the person as an individual. With this attention to the individual, we are saying: *I care about you. I am sensitive to you.* We step out of ourselves to relate to the other.

Rabbi Wolbe teaches that this is what every person craves in this world: attention, love, a smile from another. This, he says, is also what every person is capable of giving. It is the very essence of the parent/child, teacher/student, neighbor/neighbor relationship. Mastering this level of giving should lead to the highest level: *ahavas chesed* (loving to do acts of kindness). It should not be a burden, but part of one's routine, one's usual practice, to find people and see their individuality and how one can be of help specifically to them.

Rabbi Wolbe brings the story of Rabbi Moshe Rosenstein, a man known as a great *ba'al mussar* (master of character development). When he was a young boy, he entered the prominent *mussar yeshivah* in Kelm. He did not know a soul there. On his first day, he stood outside, alone. He was shy, a little lost, embarrassed to go in. Another boy approached him and greeted him warmly. "Hello. How are you? Welcome! It is so good to see you. Come in; have something to eat." The newcomer wondered if he knew the boy. *He must be from my hometown*, he thought, *although I don't recognize him*. Then a second young man came by. "Hello! It is so good to see you," he said. "How was your trip? Have you unpacked? Do you want something to eat?" Again, he was confused. He wondered if he knew this second boy. Was this young man also from his hometown?

Soon he would learn that this was the way that everyone in the *yeshivah* greeted a new person. Friend or stranger – everyone was treated like a good friend. In this school, everybody was careful to make sure that the other felt at home.

Similarly, Rabbi Wolbe tells²² the story of a young *ba'al teshuvah* (returnee to Judaism) in Israel. When asked what drew him back to Jewish practice, he answered, “It’s very simple. I grew up in a secular city. Only one religious man lived in my neighborhood. This Torah-observant man was the only one in town who would stop to say a cheerful hello. He was the only one to show an interest in me. I decided then that there was something about Torah that I wanted to know more about.”

When we move beyond loving another as ourselves, we can get to the *chesed* of *asher yechsar lo* (what he lacks). When we figure that out, we can then be sensitive to the other – asking questions that show we are interested in his life. And vice versa: by asking, we often work out what the person is missing, even if he cannot ask for it himself. That brings us to give, to do pure acts of *chesed*. It might be the needs of a visiting guest, or someone who needs help with managing the overwhelming responsibilities of her day; still others may need an honest opinion, or a listening ear. This is giving of ourselves to others.

Small Acts, Big Consequences

We see the importance of this sensitivity in the story of *Matan Torah* (the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai). One of the opening *pesukim* (verses) reads “...*vayichan sham Yisrael neged habar* (Israel camped there opposite the mountain).”²³ Rashi there comments that the *pasuk* (verse) uses the singular “*vayichan*” instead of the regular plural “*vayachanu*” because *Bnei Yisrael* (Children of Israel) were united “*ke’ish echad belev echad*

²² *Alei Shur*, vol. 2, p. 201.

²³ *Shemos* 19:2.

(like one man with one heart).” Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz expands²⁴ upon this idea based on the explanation of the Sforno that upon arrival, *Bnei Yisrael* became involved with the needs of camping. Rabbi Shmuelevitz teaches that it was at Har Sinai that *Bnei Yisrael* were concerned with caring for each other: where the other person should pitch his tent, for example. Looking out for each other made them worthy of *Matan Torah*.

This idea is illustrated by a story about a renowned principal who taught this lesson through chairs. This principal understood that it is through small acts that we grow in *chesed*. When holding class in his office, he saw an opportunity to help his students transform the *chesed* of *kamocho* into the *chesed* of *vehalachta bidrachav* (you shall go in His [God’s] ways). He simply instructed each boy to bring in a chair, not for himself, but for another boy.

We too have so many occasions to develop and refine our kindness. When someone at dinner asks us for water, we could pass the water pitcher – or we could fill his glass. Even better is to notice that his water glass is empty and fill it without waiting to be asked. If we open our eyes we will see countless opportunities to help others, hundreds of opportunities to step outside ourselves. They may seem like small acts but they have big consequences. That is what Rabbi Wolbe is saying: we have to open our eyes.

The basis of this view, of looking beyond ourselves to give to others, is based on a famous distinction made by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler in his *Kuntres HaChesed*. Rabbi Dessler writes²⁵ that God created within man two powers: giving and taking.

²⁴ *Sichos Mussar*, essay “*HaHachanah LeKabbalas HaTorah*” on *Parashas Yisro* 5731.

²⁵ *Michtav Mei’Eliyahu*, vol. 1, p. 32-33.

When man exercises his power of giving, he emulates God, but when he exercises his power of taking, loving himself so much that he wishes to draw everything towards himself, he causes destruction. This destruction is clear in the case of those who commit crimes in order to take what does not belong to them, but Rabbi Dessler says that even those who like receiving without giving anything in return are using this destructive *middah*. And there is no middle ground: any given action of an individual is motivated either by the power of giving or by the power of taking.

Sometimes we give in order to take. *Chesed* means to work on the aspect of giving for the sake of giving and not for the sake of taking. We should not give from our *kamocho*, asking ourselves: *what can I get from this?* We should instead give from *vehalachta bidrachav*, making it our goal to give for the sake of giving, and not for what we will receive or even because we will feel good from giving.

Now we return to the story of Noach with greater insight. On the *pasuk* that says the world was corrupt and full of robbery, the *Targum Onkelos* comments that the people of that time were “grabbers” – clearly driven by the faculty of taking. In the time of Noach, the people were only involved in self and satisfying self. It was a hedonistic society. They were all asking, How can I get the most for me? They were not concerned at all with the other.

We asked how corruption from robbery could compel God to declare the world in Noach’s time irredeemable, requiring Him to destroy it, and now we can understand. Robbery creates a society of completely self-absorbed people. Stealing represents the willingness to do anything at all in order to satisfy the needs of the self. Such a society cannot survive. Worse than that, Noach’s

generation did practice a type of kindness, only a perverted type. It was a society all about self-love.

In fact, the Torah, when discussing the laws concerning forbidden relationships, describes a marriage between a brother and a sister as an act of immorality but uses an interesting phrase: “*chesed hu* (it is a *chesed*).”²⁶ Is it really a *chesed*? Usually *chesed* is positive, but here it describes an immoral act. Perhaps this relationship is in part kindness, but a distorted type of kindness. Loving a relative is only an extension of self-love – not in any way the goal of a marital relationship. That is what the generation of Noah was doing.

In contrast, the people of Sedom and Amorah really wanted to hurt others, and they were aptly punished with fire and brimstone. But in Noah’s time, people were not cruel or sadistic; they simply put self above all else. This is why they were punished with water: just as Noah’s generation perverted the function of *chesed*, God perverted the function of water. The Slonimer Rebbe teaches²⁷ that it was fitting that water, which in proper proportion is so fundamentally life-giving, be the means to wreak havoc and utter destruction on them. Water that kills is the perfect way to teach that generation and generations to follow that *chesed* that serves oneself will cause destruction of the world, and not sustain it as real *chesed* is supposed to do.

Getting at the Root of the Problem

The second question we had on this *parashah* involved trying to understand Noah and his status: was he objectively righteous or

²⁶ *Vayikra* 20:17.

²⁷ *Nesivos Shalom, Bereishis*, p. 50.

only in comparison to his generation? Rabbi Shimon Schwab explains²⁸ that Noah lived for six hundred years and did not influence even a single person(!). He spent one hundred and twenty years building an ark and still did not influence anyone. Why? Because his generation was a generation involved in self – and that included Noah as well. What was the difference between Noah and the other people of his generation? The rest of the people were caught up in their selfish, physical desires. Noah was involved in spiritual pursuits – but they were only for himself and his family.

This was his generation: a generation of ego, of self. It should not be surprising, then, that the time of Noah was a time of corruption. If people focus only on themselves, robbery will ensue. Stealing will flood the world, hand-in-hand with the attitude of what-can-I-get-for-me. A society like that cannot endure. We need a world that engenders kindness at its root.

That is why, says Rabbi Schwab, had Noah lived in the times of Avraham *Avinu* – a time of outreach, of being involved in hospitality, and of bringing the name of God to the rest of the world – Noah would have been a nothing, since he, too, was self-focused.

We can understand now why the Sages judged Noah harshly. The Sages had to stand against Noah's exclusive concern with self, and against the selfishness of his generation. Rabbi Schwab writes that from a good root, no bad can come, unless in the root itself there is an imperfection. If seedlings are perfect, there will be no imperfections in the resultant trees. But if there is something imperfect in the seedlings, the trees can have imperfections. From Noah came *tzaddikim* (righteous people) – Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov – who served God.

²⁸ *Ma'ayan Beis HaSho'eiva*, p. 16.

Yet from Noach also came such wicked people as Haman and Nevuchadnetzar. If this is so, we know there must have been imperfection at the root, in Noach. The flaw in Noach was egotism.

We know that if the ego is channeled in the wrong direction we can get a Haman – a man who could order the destruction of an entire nation simply because, in a world where everyone else bowed down to him, one person refused to do so. That is a perverted sense of self. To Haman, all that mattered was Haman. Although Noach was able to direct his self-concern toward God, the trait was never rooted out. It should not be surprising, then, that from Noach came descendants with tremendous self-serving egos.

Noach's self-focus was his downfall. This deficit, in spite of his righteousness, prevented him from influencing anyone. And it was this character trait that affected future generations.

God wanted to teach him how to correct this trait – how to go outside himself. If Noach wanted to be involved with starting the world again, he would have to engage in the opposite of self – in true *chesed*. He had to be educated in giving to others. So God required him to spend an entire year feeding animals. To save the animals, God could have arranged it that they be placed on an island that He would then protect from the Flood. Instead, the animals were left to Noach's care and would never be able to reciprocate. It required that Noach go above and beyond himself. God wanted to build a new world with giving-for-the-sake-of-giving at its core. Only then would it be everlasting.

How can we take the lessons of this *parashah* (Torah portion) and keep the foundation of Noach's newly-built world solid? We can do true *chesed*. We can go above and beyond our obligations

and not just be satisfied with doing *emes*. By following the lessons of Rabbi Wolbe, to see *asher yechsar lo*, we can emulate Hashem's *middos* and reach the ultimate level of kindness – stepping outside of ourselves, beyond our ego, reaching out to the people in our lives. Let us learn from this generation of grabbers that it matters how we live. We have the power to destroy or to build simply by the manner in which we give.