

Noach: The First “Flawed” Zionist

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Parshat Noach describes the Divine reboot of creation. Witnessing the complete moral meltdown of humanity G-d decides to regenerate the entire world. A new world is launched through Noach whose progeny begin to repopulate the freshly formed planet.

In the second part of the parsha we witness Noach’s three children repopulating the human race and rapidly and inhabiting the entire globe. Despite humanity’s attempt at “population concentration”, the human race is dispersed across the four corners of the planet. Without question the final chapters of Noach are characterized by expansion – both population growth and geographical sprawl. Yet, despite all this growth and expansion, the parsha concludes with a targeted journey to a very specific country in which the Divine presence is more acutely palpable.

Conventionally, the first emigration to Israel is associated with Avram- the first believer in one Divine being. Avram had defied an entire pagan which still imagined that G-d could be associated with physical images and molten idols. Additionally, he believed so deeply in a G-d he couldn’t ‘see’ that he was willing to die a fiery death on behalf of these principles. Ultimately, Avram is rescued from the furnace and is Divinely summoned to settle in the land of a G-d which Avram alone had discovered. The first pilgrimage to Israel is the outcome of a life of religious courage and commitment!! Or so we are led to believe...

...Surprisingly, the journey to Israel is not launched by Avram himself but rather by his father Terach who assembles his entire entourage (including his son Avram) and commences a journey to the land of Kena’an. Arriving in the city of Charan he deceases and ultimately his voyage is completed by Avram who receives a direct Divine command to complete his father Terach’s journey. Terach, not Avram, is the first person to be drawn to the land of Israel !

Terach is an odd personality to be fascinated by the land of Israel. Each year, at the Pesach seder, we cite the verse in Yehoshua (24; 2) which depicts our ancestor Terach, as an idol worshipper. In fact, Chazal portray him as a pagan priest or at the very least a sculptor of pagan deities. Avram was a revolutionary who bravely disregarded his father’s traditions. Terach couldn’t be further from discovering Hashem and yet he feels lured to this special land of G-d !

The startling expedition of Terach is a template for the often winding road of Jewish history. At the dawn of our nationhood, Hashem creates an attraction to the land of Israel which can exist even in a vacuum of theological belief or in the absence of ritual or mitzvah performance. Terach has absolutely no interest in discovering Hashem nor does ritual attract him. Yet, despite these deficiencies, he is drawn

unwittingly to the land of Israel. This Divine plan insures that future Terach-like personalities will still be incorporated within Jewish experience. In His infinite wisdom, foreseeing that at various stages of history Jews would wander from religion and ritual, Hashem forged a mechanism to include all Jews within one national destiny. He fashioned the ability for a Jew to relate to his own country, people and sense of nationhood independent of classic religious experience. Terach and his pilgrimage establish a model for Jewish history. Throughout history, Jews have always heard the whisper of Terach even if they were deaf to the echo of Sinai.

This Divine plan is reiterated in the second “tochacha” in Parshat Bechukotai which concludes with the eventual retrieval of Jews from exile: “I will remember the merits of Ya’akov and those of Yitzchak and I will also remember the merits of Avraham... (Vayikra 26: 42). Indeed, Jews who adhere to the lifestyles of the Avot are recovered from exile based on their ancestor’s merits. What about Jews who deviate from their ancestral routines and abdicate a classically religious lifestyle? How will they be redeemed? The verse concludes “V’ha’aretz ezkor (I will recall their land)”. Hashem promises to recall the “merits of the Land” or the merits of those devoted to the land. By implication, devotion to land is acknowledged even in the absence of dedication to the lives of Avot. Ideally, a Jew should both deeply identify with our Avot as well as dedicate entirely dedicate his life on behalf of our land and people. This blend represents a comprehensive religious consciousness. However, for those who no longer identify with the lives of our Avot, the Covenant of the land exists independently and assures redemption. The precedent of Terach’s journey is invoked as Hashem in Parshat Bechukotai as Hashem promises redemption for all Jews.

We are currently witnessing the implementation of this Divine plan- a historical phenomenon which only He could foster. Unfortunately, we live in a world in which vast numbers of Jews are no longer captivated by classic religion or the demands of ritual. This is unfortunate and we await an era in which all hearts will veer back to Hashem. Yet, through their commitment to land, people and nationhood, millions of Jews are still engaged and involved in our common destiny. Religious Jews who reside in Israel are typically driven by an overarching sense of Divine prophecy. Despite the hardships of life in Israel, religious prophecy reinforces their resolve and bolsters their commitment to the hardships of life in Israel. The dedication of secular Israelis to our country is more astonishing. Without a comprehensive life of ritual and commandment, a secular Jew’s devotion to our country is harder to grasp. Where does their commitment and love for our land and people stem from? Evidently, the ancient call of this country and her people continues to penetrate the hearts of Jews – even those who are distant from the world of belief and ritual. If this land can enchant an idolater like Terach, it can definitely enchant Jews who may have wavered from ritual fidelity but certainly aren’t as remote as Terach the pagan-master.

The enchanting sway of the land of Israel isn't limited to Jews who physically reside in the land. Unfortunately, our people are scattered across the world and deeply splintered into various groupings and denominations. Perhaps the only common and unifying force is our joint commitment to our land and our peoplehood in that land. Jews from all denominations rally around one value- our precious land and the heart of a nation which pulses with love and devotion for that land. Terach blazed a trail which Jews have followed for millennia. The land enthalls even Jews whose hearts have turned from classic religion !