

The Little Mizbeach and the Big Ark: A Lesson For Leaders

One of the great American books — read widely in classrooms — is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. When I was in high school, my English teacher told us that after its publication in 1854, it sold no more than a few hundred copies in the first few years, and even by Thoreau's death in 1862, it had only sold 2,000. I remember finding it remarkable that he had no concept of the legacy it would have 160 years later.

One of the most consequential moments in all of world history occurs following Noah's departure from the *teivah* (ark). Noah constructs a *mizbeach* (altar) and brings sacrifices:

וַיִּבֶן נֹחַ מִזְבֵּחַ לַה' וַיִּקַּח מִכָּל הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה וּמִכָּל הָעוֹף הַטְּהוֹר וַיַּעַל עֹלֹת בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ.

Noah built an altar for Hashem, and he took from all the pure animals and all the pure birds and offered burnt offerings on the altar.

Bereishit 8:20

Immediately afterwards, the Torah details how Hashem decreed that he will never again destroy mankind the same way:

וַיִּרַח ה' אֶת רִיחַ הַנִּיחֹחַ וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵל לִבּוֹ לֹא אֲסֹף לְקַלְלַל עוֹד אֶת הָאָדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְּעֻרָיו וְלֹא אֲסֹף עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת כָּל הַיּוֹצֵר עִשְׂתִּי.

Hashem smelled the soothing fragrance and Hashem said to Himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man for the designs of man's heart are evil from his youth and I will never again smite all life as I have done."

Bereishit 8:21

The significance of this Divine proclamation is obvious. Yet there is debate as to what prompts it. One plausible reading is to focus on the latter half of the verse that *yetzer lev ha'adam ra mineurav*, God realizes man is fallible and decides to have mercy on him.

However, this explanation is problematic because merely a few chapters earlier, God explicitly acknowledges man's immense faults and deficiencies:

וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי רַבָּה רַעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרְצוֹ וְכָל יֵצֵר מִחַשְׁבֹּת לִבּוֹ רָק רַע כָּל הַיּוֹם.

Hashem saw that the evil of man was great on the earth, and that every design of his heart's thoughts was only evil, all day long.

Bereishit 6:5

Surely this realization of man's evil nature is not new and would not warrant a dramatic declaration transforming the course of world history.

This prompts other commentators to emphasize the earlier part of the verse, *vayarach Hashem et reiach hanichoach*, Hashem was pleased by the aroma of the offerings. Indeed, this is Chazal's interpretation. The Gemara (*Eruvin* 65a) describes how Hashem was appeased by the burnt offerings and He therefore acted more favorably towards mankind afterwards.

According to this second interpretation, Noah's actions constitute a remarkable accomplishment. Guaranteeing that mankind will never be fully destroyed is undoubtedly one of history's greatest feats. But is Noah even aware of this? In the verse itself, the Torah relates how Hashem made this declaration *el libo* (in His heart). Does this mean that Noah was never informed?

Our great commentators debate this question. Ibn Ezra contends that yes, Noah was indeed informed of this promise immediately afterwards by Hashem. Seforno too believes that Noah was told, but only later on after he and his family are commanded to keep the seven Noachide laws and establish a covenant with Hashem in the ensuing chapter.

In contrast, Ramban claims that, remarkably, Noah was never told. Only at the time of the composition of the Torah did Hashem inform any of Noah's descendants about the ramifications of Noah's *korbanot*.



Ramban's interpretation is incredibly striking. Noah guaranteed through his actions that God will never again destroy the world and he had no idea! Noah was never informed!

On the one hand, Noah's lack of awareness seems almost unfathomable. It is tragic and disheartening. But at the same time, this story is so human. It captures the daily drama of our lives. We too perform all sorts of positive deeds — praying, performing mitzvot, committing acts of kindness, learning Torah — and we do not know the impact of our acts. We are in the dark about whether the extra mitzvah "tipped the scales" or if saying a chapter of Tehillim saved the life of a fellow person. Our views are obstructed from seeing the chain reaction prompted by our deeds.

This certainly can be demoralizing because we would like to know the impacts we make (especially positive ones). [This lack of awareness may have prompted Noah's depression in the continuation of the story.] Yet, it can also be deeply inspiring and motivating. So often we think our actions do not have any impact, let alone a large one. But who knows? We may never be aware that we have had the impact of a Noah! Though he was completely unaware, Thoreau's composition has reverberated for many decades since he wrote it, and

our contributions to this world may do the same.

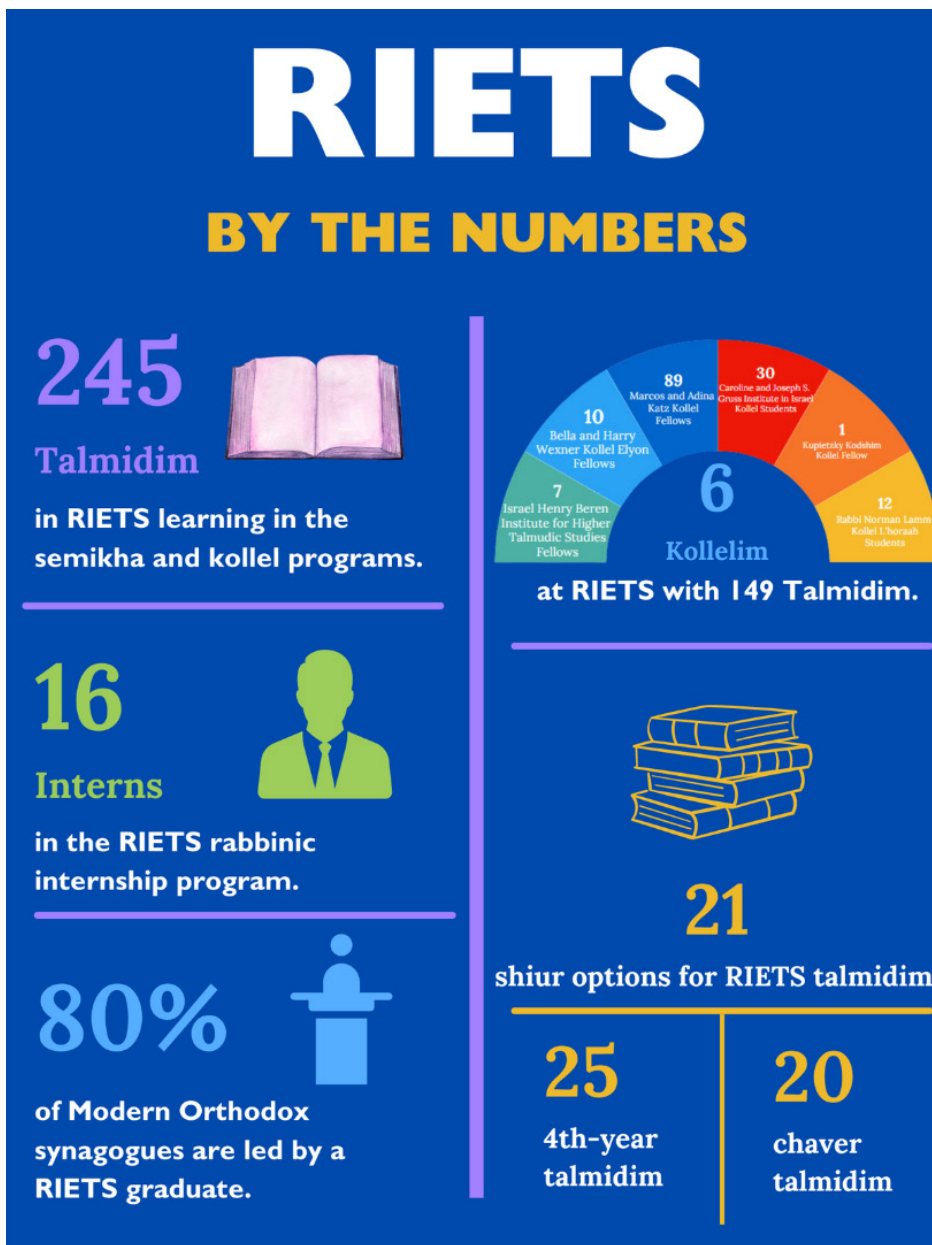
Perhaps this explains why, according to Ramban, God never informs Noah: to challenge man to act righteously and perform good deeds without knowledge of results, because we may have an impact as great as Noah had.

I would like to add a further reflection that is particularly relevant to the celebration of the Chag HaSemikhah. Noah's action is not what you would expect to be a world-saving act. It is creating an aroma. Smell makes the least physical impression. It is fleeting, lasts a moment, and then it is gone!

Somewhat ironically, Noah is best known for the *teivah*. But it is not the big ark that saves the world for eternity, it is the small *mizbeach* and the fleeting aroma!

How significant that is for new rabbis! We think our grand actions or dramatic gestures are what has the most impact. But the smallest interactions and efforts can make the biggest difference. If we consider our own lives, how many moments do we remember where another person said something at the right time or did a little act of *chesed* that touched us?! They too likely do not even realize the impact it had! Noah's *korbanot* are a reminder of our capacity to make important and lasting contributions and not even know it.

In my rabbinical training at RIETS, I served as rabbinic intern to the highly accomplished and deeply revered Rabbi Kenneth Hain at Congregation Beth Sholom. During my time with him, it struck me that frequently when congregants would express their appreciation and respect for Rabbi



Hain, they would bring up seemingly minor moments or acts that meant so much to them. Though a powerful orator who delivered impressive *derashot*, it was the little things that people treasured: warm gestures, supportive looks, and brief check-ins.

The message of this Noah story is to never doubt the significance of our

actions. We do not know — and may never know — the impact we make. Let us — *mechanchim* and *rabbanim* — never forget that so often what is most influential and meaningful is not what we say when we are at the pulpit or in front of the room but the quiet and less dramatic things we say and do in more private moments.