



*Parashah Insights*  
by  
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*Parashat Noah*  
*Noah and Avraham*

*Praise or Criticism?*

“These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with G-d” (*Bereshit* 6:9).

We find similar high praise of Noah at the end of *Parashat Bereshit*: “And Noah found favor in the eyes of G-d” (6:5). In these verses, the Torah describes a true, perfect *tzaddik* who lived his entire life close to the Al-mighty. In contrast, however, our Sages’ assessment of Noah is often less than complimentary. In fact, we might say that they go out of their way to put a negative twist on the Torah’s positive words.

For example, the Torah says that Noah was a perfect *tzaddik* “in his generations.” “Some of our Sages interpret this as praise: had he lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have been even more righteous. And some Sages interpret this as criticism: for his generation he was righteous, but had he lived in the generation of Avraham, he would not have been considered anything” (Rashi, citing *Sanhedrin* 108a; see *Bereshit Rabbah* 30:9). However, even the words of praise imply that Noah was only considered righteous in comparison to his wicked contemporaries.



We find the unfavorable comparison to Avraham in another *midrash* as well. The Torah tells us that “Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with G-d” (*Bereshit* 6:9). Of Avraham the Torah says, “walk before Me and be perfect” (*Bereshit* 17:1). Both Noah and Avraham are called *tamim*, perfect, but Noah walked “with G-d,” while Avraham walked “before” G-d. Our Sages compare this to a father who had two sons, one older and one younger. Knowing that the younger son was weak and in need of support, he told him, “Walk at my side and I will help you along.” The older son was stronger and more capable, so the father told him, “You can walk on ahead of me.” Avraham’s faith was firm, so he walked before G-d. Because Noah was not as strong, he needed G-d at his side to support him and keep him going (*Bereshit Rabbah* 30:10).<sup>1</sup>

When the Flood began, the Torah tells us, “And Noah...came to the Ark because of the floodwaters” (*Bereshit* 7:7). Rabbi Yohanan said, Noah was lacking in faith, for if the waters had not reached his ankles, he would not have entered the Ark” (*Yalkut Shimoni Bereshit* 7:56; see Rashi on 7:7). Noah had invested one hundred and twenty years of his life in the building of the Ark, using its construction and the upcoming Flood as a theme to exhort his contemporaries to repent. And yet, when the moment of truth arrived, our Sages tell us that he still hesitated, and had to be pushed into the Ark by the onset of the rain.

Following the flood, when Noah and his family emerged from the Ark, he began life anew and started cultivating edible crops, surely a worthwhile endeavor. The Torah writes, “Noah began to be a man of the soil” (9:20). However, our Sages interpret the words *vayahel Noah*, literally “And Noah began,” as “And Noah corrupted himself (*nit’hallel*) and made himself profane (*hullin*).” They point out that his decision to plant a grapevine was a poor one, which led him to drunkenness and degradation. He should have chosen to plant other, more

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<sup>1</sup> We find an allusion to this concept in the thirteenth blessing of the *Amidah*. The blessing begins “on the *tzaddikim* and on the *hassidim*,” and concludes, “[Hashem is the] Support and Refuge of the *tzaddikim*,” with no further mention of the *hassidim*. Noah, the prototype *tzaddik*, needed the Al-mighty’s constant support. Avraham, the prototype *hassid*, was capable of progressing without it.



useful crops, which would not have led to this humiliating downfall (*Bereshit Rabbah* 36:3).

Where Noah is concerned, it appears that our Sages cast positive statements in a negative light. When it comes to Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov, our saintly Forefathers, they seem to have a different policy. Even statements which might have been understood as criticism are interpreted favorably and viewed as praise (for example, see Rashi on *Bereshit* 27:19-24, 34-36). In particular, Noah is viewed at his worst when compared to our Forefather Avraham. Let us try to understand why this is so.

### *The Father of Israel*

The world was created in order for the nation of Israel to fulfill the Torah, as we learn from our Sages' explanation of the word *bereshit*: "For the Torah which is called *reshit darko*, the beginning of His way, (*Mishle* 8:22), and for Israel, who are called *reshit tevuato*, the first of His crop (*Yirmiyahu* 2:3)" (see Rashi on *Bereshit* 1:1, citing *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:1). The Ramhal (*Derech Hashem* 2:4) explains that in the generations following Creation, it was not yet known who would be the ancestor of Israel, Hashem's chosen nation. At that time, any genuinely righteous individual could have earned this lofty role for his descendents, but until Avraham, no one was sufficiently worthy.

At the time of the Generation of the Dispersal Hashem chose Avraham to be the progenitor of Israel, while the rest of mankind was divided into seventy nations. In the words of the Ramhal, "Avraham alone was selected due to his deeds and was elevated, and was established to be the superior, precious tree in keeping with the highest level of mankind, and it was granted to him to produce branches like himself." Israel would be humanity at its highest state, while the other nations would remain on their existing lower levels. These seventy are the roots of all the nations which exist to this day. Any new nations appearing on the scene of history ever since are branches of these original roots.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See *Parashah Insights on Haazinu* for a fuller discussion of this topic.



However, since Noah was, after all, a truly righteous individual who “found favor in the eyes of G-d,” he did merit an important role. He is the ancestral root of the righteous gentiles, the “sons of Noah” who fulfill the seven Noahide laws. The Ramhal writes that Noah and his righteous descendents will have a share in the World to Come (*Derech Hashem* 2:4).<sup>3</sup>

Why did Hashem have to wait for Avraham? The Torah itself tells us that “Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations,” who “found favor in the eyes of G-d.” Should that not have been merit enough to make him the root and tree of Israel? And yet, the fact remains that he was not appointed to be the long-awaited ancestor of Israel. With this in mind, we can now understand our Sages’ negative interpretations of Noah’s character. If Noah was not chosen, there clearly was a reason. Our Sages’ evaluation of Noah, handed down in the Oral Tradition, explains why despite Noah’s piety, Avraham, and not Noah, was the “superior, precious tree” which would “produce branches like himself.” True, Noah was a *tzaddik*, but Avraham was a supreme servant of G-d.

### ***Halvri***

Righteous though he was, Noah was weak where Avraham was strong. He could not manage on his own, and could only continue traveling the path of righteousness with G-d at his side at all times. Avraham, in contrast, was a powerhouse of courage and conviction, capable of striding forward unaided. This moral strength is expressed in his distinctive title of Avraham *Halvri*. Our Sages tell us that this term, usually translated as “the Hebrew,” is derived from the words *me’ever lanahar*, literally “on the opposite bank of the river.” Avraham stood apart from his entire generation – in fact, from the entire world: “The whole world was on one side (*ever*) and he was on the other side” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 42:8). “For all the people in the entire world did not know Hashem then, because they worshipped idols. Only Avraham knew his Creator, and he alone was on one

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<sup>3</sup> See Rambam, *Hilchot Issure Biah* 14:4, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:5, and *Hilchot Melachim* 8:10-11 for further explanation of the concept of righteous gentiles, their status, and their share in the World to Come.



side of the world to serve Hashem. And all the people in the world were across on the outside” (*Etz Yosef*).

Hashem chose Avraham because he had the power to walk alone and on his own. This quality, passed on by our first ancestor to all subsequent generations, is the basis of our people’s incredible ability to withstand the trials and temptations of two thousand years of exile. Bilam, the infamous non-Jewish prophet who sought to curse our nation in the desert, was forced to recognize this strength. He said, “Behold, this is a people who dwell alone and are not counted among the nations” (*Bamidbar 23:9*). Because Avraham was *Halvri*, we, his descendents, have remained strong and walked alone before G-d. We have stood apart and retained our devotion to Hashem and His Torah in the face of the overwhelming heresy, corruption, and degeneracy in every society around us.

This trait was evident early in our history. Our Forefather Yaakov was compelled to leave the safe shelter of home and *yeshivah* to live in the unsavory company of Lavan, a disreputable swindler of the worst sort, for no less than twenty-two years. For all those long years, he had no contact with his parents or other like-minded companions. And yet, when it was over Yaakov could say, “I have lived with Lavan and fulfilled the six hundred and thirteen commandments, and I did not learn from his evil ways” (*Bereshit 32:5*, Rashi).<sup>4</sup> Alone and far from home, it would have been more than easy for Yaakov to absorb at least some of Lavan’s attitudes and ways. But Yaakov was Avraham’s grandson, and he lived apart from the depravity surrounding him on all sides. He passed on this power to his children after him, making us “a people who dwell alone and are not counted among the nations.”

This is why Hashem chose Avraham over Noah.

### ***Shattering the Idols***

The Rambam describes the great spiritual stature of Avraham *Avinu*, “the pillar of the world,” who alone of all mankind came to recognize the Al-mighty (see

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<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word *garti*, “I lived,” is composed of the same letters as *taryag*, an allusion to the six hundred and thirteen commandments.



*Hilchot Avodat Kochavim*, Chapter One). And yet, at the same time, the Rambam also mentions that there were other isolated individuals who knew G-d, such as Hanoach, Metushelah, Noah, Shem and Ever (1:2).

The Torah tells us, “And Hanoach walked with G-d.” Even when he lived on earth, he was so completely spiritual that he was taken up to Heaven without dying (*Sefer HaLikutim* on *Bereshit* 5:24). Hanoach’s son Metushelah (*Sanhedrin* 108b, *Sukkah* 52, Rashi) and Noah were also *tzaddikim*. Noah’s son Shem, together with Ever, his great-grandson, taught Torah in a renowned *yeshivah*, attended by no less a student than our Forefather Yaakov (*Megillah* 17a). What made Avraham more worthy than all these great men, Noah included?

The answer lies in the continuation of Avraham’s story. The Rambam relates that Avraham smashed the idolatrous images widespread in his time, and went on to educate the world about the one G-d, traveling from city to city and country to country with his message of truth. Finally he reached the Land of Canaan – the future *Eretz Yisrael* – where he attracted tens of thousands of students and followers.

The Raavad raises an interesting question (*Hasagot* on 1:3). Shem and Ever, both great *tzaddikim*, lived in Canaan. Didn’t they also protest against the rampant idolatry around them?

Perhaps they did, says the Raavad, but there was a difference between them and Avraham. It was Avraham who took action and shattered the idols – not any of these others. His fight against wickedness and idolatry is what distinguished him from people like Shem and Ever. It is true that they studied G-d’s Word, but they did not go out to change the world; they changed only themselves. Avraham, in contrast, turned the world around.

But what of Noah, singled out by Hashem to preserve mankind? As we have seen, the Torah itself extols Noah’s piety and virtue. However, the Torah’s wording reveals that there was a problem – namely, that “Noah walked *with G-d*.” His piety was confined to his own relationship with Hashem, and that relationship extended only as far as his own four cubits.



Noah did not reprimand his contemporaries, and that is why he could not save them (*Alshich* on *Bereshit* 6:9, citing the Sages). Things had gone so far that in order to stave off the Flood, Noah would have had to inspire his entire generation to repent, and he did not.

This was the critical difference between Avraham and Noah. Avraham did save his entire generation, as we find in the Torah. When Avraham was commanded by Hashem to leave his home and his family, he took with him “the souls they had made in Haran” (*Bereshit* 12:5). Rashi tells us that these were “[the souls] that he had brought under the wings of the Divine Presence. Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women.” Wherever he went, “he proclaimed the Name of Hashem” (see *Bereshit* 12:8, 13:4, and 21:33, Rashi). He taught the word of Hashem and brought mankind close to Him. This great *hesed* of teaching and giving to others was the essence of his life.

Avraham smashed idols and changed the world; Noah did not. He walked only with G-d, a lonely *tzaddik* in a wicked generation, much like Hanoah and Metushelah had been before him, and Shem and Ever after him. Avraham was a *tzaddik* who went beyond his own safe confines to teach the world, with an impact on his own generation and all those to come. This difference is what made him alone worthy of becoming the ancestor of Israel for all eternity.

### ***The Chariot***

Being chosen as the ancestor of the Jewish nation meant even more than just being “the precious tree... [which would] produce branches like himself.” Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov were elevated to the highest level a human being can achieve: they became part of the Al-mighty’s Divine Chariot, through which He reveals Himself in this world. In the words of our Sages, “The Forefathers are themselves Hashem’s Chariot” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 47:8). Rabbi Yitzhak D’min Acco, a disciple of the Ramban, discusses this profound concept in *Me’irat Enayim*, his work on the Kabbalistic references in the Ramban’s commentary on the Torah.

Our Forefather Avraham’s primary attribute was lovingkindness, so much so that he is called *ish hahesed*, the man of lovingkindness. Yitzhak is described as



*ne'ezar b'gevurah*, girded with strength. He was the embodiment of *din* (judgment). Judgment implies uncompromising strength of conviction, to the point of total subjugation of the evil inclination. Yaakov was *ahuz b' middat ha'emet*, imbued with the trait of truth.

These noble attributes became so deeply embedded in their very being and so much an inseparable element of their bodies and their souls, that our Forefathers became "Hashem's Chariot." In other words, in an esoteric sense, Avraham was akin to a microcosm of Divine lovingkindness, Yitzhak of Divine justice, and Yaakov of Divine truth. As Rabbi Yitzhak D'min Acco explains, their bond was so strong that they became the living personification of these Divine Attributes, like a branch connected to the ultimate Source. This is why, unlike Noah, they merited being the foundation of the Jewish nation.

Hashem told Avraham, "Walk before Me." When Avraham refined and elevated himself and his service of Hashem to the point where he became "Hashem's Chariot," he moved on to a level far ahead of all mankind. This is how Avraham, and then Yitzhak and Yaakov who followed in his footsteps, walked before G-d. They, the Chariot, were at the forefront, with the rest of mankind behind them. It was for this unique quality that Hashem chose Avraham and his descendents after him as His beloved nation for all time.

***This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.***