



Noach - נח

# Ashreinu אשרינו

Enhancing your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion



## The Failure of the Cheshvan Yid

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We just finished the month of Tishrei, coming on the heels of its predecessor, Elul. Shofar, apples in honey, Shabbat Shuva, Yom Kippur, Neilah, Succot, lulav and etrog, Hoshana Rabba, and Shmini Atzeret, Simchat To-

rah. And every Jew in the world is asking “Can’t we take a break?!”

And then comes Cheshvan. The epitome of uneventful. Day after long day of the same. Week after week of routine, habits, and monotony. It begs the question: couldn’t the Torah have spread the love a little more evenly?

In 1978, Rav Soloveitchik delivered a lecture at M.I.T, later printed by Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought on the topic of catharsis. In that essay, he de-

velops the idea of the heroism of normative life. He explains that living according the values and details of the halacha system, with its demands and relentless-ness, “...is certainly heroic. It is less spectacular than the death of an Achilles; yet it is more heroic, more redeeming, because it is performed in humility and in the hush of a dark night of loneliness.”

In essence, the Rav is speaking about the Cheshvan Jew.

I’ve often thought that there are three primary emotions in the Jewish calendar, and that each Jew, to a certain extent embodies one of these three.

There is the Elul Yid: A Jew who lives his life with the persistent, ever present understanding that Yom HaDin is coming. Every action must be performed meticulously, every mitzvah with alacrity. Then there’s the Adar Yid: A Jew who lives a life of simcha. A person who knows that the only way to overcome challenge is to laugh and bring simcha to others. Every mitzvah is an opportunity to sing, every day a new moment to celebrate. And finally, there’s the Av Yid: I used to make

fun of the Av Yid, with his serious demeanor and killjoy attitude. But in truth, the Av Yid knows all too well that there is pain in this world, pain that can only be remedied with sensitivity and compassion.

If you think for a moment, you could probably assess rather quickly what kind of Yid you are - or at least the ingredients.

Of course, the Torah demands that we are each of these at different points in the year. But if we look carefully, all year long, we are reactionary Jews; responding to the stimulus of the yearly cycle. We're happy, we're serious, we're sad, we're hopeful, we're generous, we're meticulous. This is all in reaction to the cycle of the year itself.

But then comes Cheshvan. And Hashem asks us now: What kind of Jew are you proactively? What fills you and fuels you during the long nights of Cheshvan?

The answer to this question is perhaps the most challenging of our lives. Essentially, if given the time, given the chance, given the blank slate, who do we wish to become?

This, of course, is the story of Noach; a polarizing figure in Rabbinic literature. On the one hand, Chazal note that he is called a tzadik, but the pasuk then qualifies, "in his generation".

Rashi, famously notes this dispute:

יש מרבתינו דורשים אותו לשבח, כל שכן  
שאלו היה בדור צדיקים היה צדיק יותר, ויש  
שדורשים אותו לגנאי, לפי דורו היה צדיק,  
ואלו היה בדורו של אברהם לא היה נחשב  
לכלום  
(6:9)

Was Noach a tzadik only when compared to the evildoers of his generation, or perhaps in spite of them?

This dispute bothered me for a long time, for it is unlike Chazal to attempt to defame a Biblical character. Give him the benefit of the doubt! Let it simply be stated that he was a tzadik. But, of course, if Chazal saw within Noach a complex and nuanced person, then it behooves us to do the same. Noach, I believe, is the failed Cheshvan Yid.

Allow me to explain. Noach grows up in a world of moral decay and depravity. Noach alone realizes the decrepitness of such society, and is thus chosen by God

to build an ark, so that life may be spared. For over a century, Noach builds and builds, fending off ridicule, excommunication, and social ostracism. Yet he perseveres. When the flood waters descend, he, along with his family, are tasked with taking care of the needs of every animal -- a job he does with compassion and dedication.

Then the flood is over, and Noach steps out into a new world, free of depravity, cleansed from the mistakes of the past, and is given carte blanche to build the world as he sees fit.

Here Noach fails. His Cheshvan has arrived, and the world is open to him. He no longer needs to act in reaction, but now can decide proactively. There are no cues, no foils, no problems. A blank check and a brave new world.

Noach plants a vineyard, harvests his grapes, and gets drunk. He fails to build his world Cheshvan. And Chazal thus note that he was a tzadik, a real tzadik, but only in reaction. With nothing to react to, Noach is lost. He's an Elul tzadik, a Tishrei tzadik. But the real challenge is Cheshvan. Cheshvan, the center of the year. The place where we ask who we really are, and who we'd like to become.

## Noach and Morality

Shalom Brauser ('19)

We are all acutely aware of the notion of reward and punishment. Something good is done, the doer is rewarded. Something bad, and he is punished. This is one of the foundations of our understanding of God. He is a God of justice, who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. But what is righteous and what is wicked? By what standards and rules are actions measured? The answer is, of course, the Torah. The Torah which brings heavenly characteristics down to Earth, and shapes these abstract concepts into values embodied by halacha, God's code of laws. We know this. We follow the laws, and we are rewarded accordingly, and vice-versa.

How then can we understand the third pasuk of this week's parsha? The pasuk says, "The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness" (Bereishit 6:11). The people were sinning, and they were acting lawlessly, but against what law? The Torah had

not been given yet, Avraham hadn't introduced monotheism yet. How can they be held responsible for breaking laws that didn't exist yet? The question comes down to, was there morality before the giving of the Torah? Do our moral obligations derive from the Torah itself, and thereby God, or are they inherent to humanity?

We all have a strong moral sense. It seems almost natural to us. But some would argue that it is in fact not nature that gives us this moral sense, but the Torah. It lays out laws and through them illustrates the essence of morality. It tells us not to murder, to covet, to adulterate. It tells us to care for the orphan, the widow, the stranger in our gates. And so these values have been adopted by many religions of the world, and have spread and become what we now consider morality. This is the argument for Torah-given morality.

But this is incorrect. There is clearly a pre-Torah morality. For instance, when Avimelech confronts Avraham, he says, "You have done to me things that ought not to be done" (Bereishit 20:9). This implies that there is some sort of code of right and wrong that should not be broken. Hashem, in creating the world, refers to His creations as "good." The Tree of Knowledge is the Tree of "Good and Bad." On a more simple level, the gemara (Eruvin 100b) offers a proof for pre-Torah morality:

"Rabbi Yohanan said: Even if the Torah had not been given, we would nonetheless have learned modesty from the cat, which covers its excrement, and that stealing is objectionable from the ant, which does not take grain from another ant, and forbidden relations from the dove, which is faithful to its partner."

Morality is evident in nature itself. It is something primeval and has been present in man and beast since the beginning. But this does not mean that it is not God-given. Our inner sense of morality is part of what it means to be created in the *tzelem*, the image, of Hashem. Hashem imparted a piece of his eternal and otherworldly values to humanity. He gave us all this amazing gift, and later bequeathed a more detailed and magnificent moral manifesto to Klal Yisrael--the Torah. So yes, technically there were no "laws" for the *Dor Hamabul* to break, but what they disregarded and scorned was their internal sense of right and wrong, their internal piece of Hashem himself, and that is why they were punished.



## The Value of Friendship

Donie Zak ('21)

Towards the end of Parshat Noach the Torah tells the story of the Tower of Bavel and the Generation of the Dispersion. The Torah tells us, "All the land spoke the same language and had common things between them" (Bereishit 11:1).

The Torah then relates that these people lived in the land of Shinar and they decided to make a city and a tower reaching to heaven. Hashem came down to see what the people had built and said: "They are all unified with one language, and this is what they decide to do. We will confuse their language and they will not be able to understand one another's language. Hashem went down and dispersed them across the face of the Earth and they stopped building the city and the tower. The place the Generation of the Dispersion was living in was then called Bavel, meaning confused, because Hashem confused their language there and scattered them across the face of the Earth" (11:6-9).

Rashi then asks a question: Whose sin was worse? The Generation of the Flood, or the Generation of the Dispersion? The Generation of the Flood did not go against Hashem and yet were destroyed, but the Generation of the Dispersion went against Hashem, even trying to wage war with Him, and yet they did not perish from the world. Instead they were just spread out across the face of the Earth. Why did the people who didn't go against Hashem get destroyed, but the people who did go against Hashem did not?

Rashi answers that the Generation of the Flood were robbers who had conflict amongst one another, but the Generation of the Dispersion treated one another with love and friendship and therefore were not destroyed, despite going against Hashem.

This teaches us that disagreements between people are harmful and can end in destruction, as it did for the Generation of the Flood. Hashem values our friendships and our love and respect for one another, and so we should treat each other with those values.



# The Life of Noach

Adina Hirsch ('19)

“אלה תולדות נח נח איש צדיק תמים היה  
בדורותיו”

(Bereishit 6:9)

The above statement, while well known and seemingly clear, also holds a deep significance. Rashi, along with other commentaries, interprets this as a possible criticism of Noach. He explains that while Noach was considered righteous by God, this was only relative to the generation he lived in because it was filled with evil. In contrast, some sages believe that if Noach was able to be righteous in his generation of terrible sinners, then he certainly would have been even more righteous in a generation of righteous people, while being surrounded by positive influences and righteous companions.

One proof that Noach was in fact a righteous man can be seen in the pesukim. Normally, immediately after mentioning the generations of a person, the Torah lists all of that person's children. Instead of informing us of Noach's children, however, our pasuk continues on and says, “Noach was a righteous man.” Noach was so righteous that he merited having a legacy to carry on his name.

When an adult is asked: “What are you living for?” they will almost always answer: “For my children!” When their children grow up and have children of their own, they will also live for their children, and so on. The greatest legacy you can leave is your children, because they pass down everything that you have worked so hard for in your life and they continue to spread your values to others.

There is another pasuk that states: “The three sons of Noach were Shem, Cham, and Yefet” (Bereishit 6:10). The commentaries explain how, allegorically, we can see in the names of Noach's sons the proper way to perform mitzvot. We should do mitzvot with “*shem*,” for only Hashem's name, without other motives. Secondly with “*cham*,” warmth and feeling out of love and passion for Hashem, not just mechanically. Finally, a mitzvah should be performed with “*yefet*,” beauty, in the nicest way possible. Noach was a righteous man -- whether that be objective or subjective -- with a beautiful legacy to carry on his name. Hashem granted him the honor of having a lasting legacy that even continues today, to teach us how to behave righteously. May we all learn from Noach and be the most righteous versions of ourselves.

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