

Noah, Abraham, and the Power of God

This week's reading is from Parashat Noach (*Shemot / Genesis 6:9-11:32*). The opening verses tell us that the Lord saw all of the wickedness of mankind on the face of the earth (וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וְכָל-יִצְרָר מִחֻשְׁבֹת לְבוֹ רַק רָע כָּל-הַיּוֹם:). The Lord said that the heart of man was consistently focused upon evil (*Bereshit / Genesis 6:9*). It grieved the Lord that He had made man. As a result, the Lord was going to bring a great flood to destroy all life having breath from the face of the earth. God instructs Noah to build an ark and then Noah, his family, two of every unclean animal, and 7 pairs of every clean animal enter into the ark. In *Bereshit / Genesis 9:11* the Lord says וַהֲקִמֹתִי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם *"I establish my covenant with you,"* declaring that He will establish His covenant again with man. He places His bow as a reminder of this covenant to not destroy the earth by water (flood) again. The interesting topic about this week's portion is found in the opening words that describe Noah as a righteous man. The Scriptures describe Moshe as a righteous man. The question is, based upon the generation that he lived, how righteous would one have to be in order to excel beyond the generations of Noah? How righteous was Noah and are there different levels of righteousness?

ספר בראשית פרק ו *Bereshit / Genesis 6:9*

ט אלה תולדות נח נח איש צדיק תמים
היה בדורתי ואת-האלהים התהלך-נח:
6:9 These are the records of the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God. (NASB)

The question that presents itself with regard to the righteousness of Noah, *"Are there really degrees in truth and righteousness?"* If you were asked this question, how would you respond? Yes, No, Maybe? In Hebrew a *"righteous one"* is called a *"Tsadik"* (צדיק, singular, *"Tsadikim,"* צדיקים, plural). According to Jewish tradition, the Tsadik is a title given to person who is considered righteous, such people as Biblical figures and later the rabbis of blessed memory. The root of the word *"Tsadik,"* is צדק *tzedek*, which means *"justice"* or *"righteousness,"* and is also the root for *"tzedakah"* meaning *"charity,"* or literally *"righteousness."* The term Tsadik, *"righteous,"* and its associated meanings, are well developed in Rabbinic thought which may also be compared to the Talmudic concept of the *"khasid"* (*"pious one,"* from the root khesed חסד). The question is though whether the concept of different degrees of righteousness is really biblical? Well, interestingly enough, Yeshua had something to say concerning levels of righteousness according to *Matthew 5:18-20*.

Matthew 5:18-20

5:18 'For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 5:19 'Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in

the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 5:20 'For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. (NASB)

Yeshua commented to his disciples saying, “*unless your righteousness surpasses that of the pharisees.*” This statement is significant because, how can one’s righteousness surpass or exceed that of another? Can a person be two or three times more correct than a disagreeing party? Are there degrees in truth and righteousness? Well, according to the Scriptures it appears that not all righteous persons are equal. There does appear to be different individuals with differing levels of holiness and righteousness. Based upon the Torah portion, here in Parashat Noah, the text appears to call our attention to the righteousness of individuals in the narrative, especially in the cases of Noah and Abraham. We can see this if we compare the different ways in which the Torah describes both Noah and Abraham according to *Bereshit / Genesis 6:9 and 17:1*.

Bereshit / Genesis 6:9

6:9 These are the records of the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God. (NASB)

ספר בראשית פרק ו

ט אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלָּךְ-נֹחַ:

Bereshit / Genesis 17:1

17:1 Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless. (NASB)

ספר בראשית פרק יז

א וַיְהִי אַבְרָם בֶּן-תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה וַתֵּשַׁע שָׁנָיִם וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי-אֱלֹהֵי הַתְּהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי וְהָיָה תָּמִים:

Based upon these Scriptures, the Torah states that Noah “*walked with God*” (אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים) whereas for Abraham, we are told the Lord speaks to Abraham and says “*Walk before Me*” (הִתְהַלָּךְ לִפְנֵי). The difference here is that Noah walked with God, while Abraham walked before God. What is the difference between walking with God and walking Before God? The Torah also tells us the following in *Devarim / Deuteronomy 13:5* וְהַנְּבִיא הַהוּא אֹחַלֵם הַחַלּוֹם הַהוּא יוֹמֵת כִּי דִבֶּר-סֵרָה עַל-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם וְהַפֹּדֵךְ מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים לְהַדְיָנָה מִן-הַדָּרָךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ לְלַכֵּת: *13:5 'But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you*

from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you. (NASB) In Deuteronomy, we find this concept of walking according to “*the way the Lord commanded,*” which is synonymous to walking after the Lord your God. So within these three scripture verses, there is “*walking with God,*” “*walking before God,*” and “*walking after God.*” How do all of these things fit together? The answer may be found in the Torah descriptions of righteousness. Thinking about righteousness, as you know, righteousness is not an instantaneous thing that occurs in our lives, righteousness and righteous living actually takes time to develop in our lives. For example, after Adam had sinned, we see the onset of a natural order of decay and death. There was not an instantaneous shift in the world to death, it was more gradual and we can see this based upon the life spans of those recorded in the book of Genesis, where each subsequent person lived shorter and shorter lives. Similarly, the Lord did not seek to correct the world instantaneously, rather, mankind was given instructions to obey the word of the Lord. The significance of these things is in the walk of the righteous, it is a slow, gradual, and steady moral progression that occurs in our lives. For example, when we first come to faith in the Messiah, we did not instantaneously walk perfect before God and I do not think we will ever walk perfectly before the Lord in this life. However, we do strive to do so with each day we live here on earth.

The rabbis of blessed memory (Chachameinu Zichronam Liv'racha, חכמינו זכרונם לברכה) also asked the same questions regarding Noah, righteousness, and the generation that he lived in according to Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 30, Part 9 (מדרש רבה). (בראשית פרשה ל סימן ט).

Midrash Rabbah Bereshit, Parashat 30, Part 9

In his generations. Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah differed. Rabbi Judah said, Only in his generations was he a righteous man (by compromise); had he flourished in the generation of Moshe or Samuel, he would not have been called righteous, in the street of the totally blind, the one-eyed man is called clear sighted, and the infant is called a scholar. It is as if a man who had a wine vault opened one barrel and found it vinegar; another found it vinegar; the third, however, he found turning sour. It is turning, people said to him. Is there any better here? He retorted. Similarly, In his generations he was a righteous man. Rabbi Nehemiah said, If he was righteous in his generation, how much more so had he lived in the age of Moshe. He might be compared to a tightly closed phial of perfume lying in a graveyard, which nevertheless gave forth a fragrant odor; how much more then if it were outside the graveyard.

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה ל סימן ט

ט בדורותיו, רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה, רבי יהודה אמר בדורותיו היה צדיק, הא אלו היה בדורו של משה או בדורו של שמואל לא היה צדיק, בשוק

סמייא צווחין לעווירא סגי נהור, משל לאחד שהיה לו מרתף אחד של יין, פתח הבית אחת ומצאה של חומץ, שניה כן, שלישית ומצאה קוסס, אמרין ליה קוסס הוא, אמר להון ואית הכא טב מינה א"ל לא, כך בדור-רותיו היה צדיק הא אלו היה בדורו של משה או בדורו של שמואל לא היה צדיק, רבי נחמיה אמר ומה אם בדורותיו היה צדיק, אלו היה בדורו של משה או בדורו של שמואל על אחת כמה וכמה, משל לצלוחית של אפרסמון מוקפת צמיד פתיל, ומונחת בין הקברות, והיה ריחה נודף, ואלו היה חוץ לקברות עאכ"ו, משל לבתולה שהיתה שרויה בשוק של זונות ולא יצא עליה שם רע, אלו היתה בשוקן של כשרות על אחת כמה וכמה, כך ומה אם בדורותיו היה צדיק אלו היה בדורו של משה או בדורו של שמואל על אחת כמה וכמה.

According to the midrash, rabbi Judah said that it was only in his generation that he (Noah) was considered a righteous man. Noah was a righteous man by compromise. What does it mean *“by compromise?”* He says that if he had lived in the time of Moshe, he would not have been called righteous. He makes a comparison to the street that contains men who are totally blind. A one eyed man is called clear sighted, and an infant a scholar. Another parable that is used is that of a wine vault, one barrel is vinegar, another is vinegar, the third is found turning sour. The idea is that in comparison to his generation, it did not take much to be considered a righteous man. Rabbi Nehemiah said on the other hand that he was in fact a righteous man in his generation. The comparison that is made is to a perfume bottle laying in the midst of a graveyard. Though there is death all around, within is a fragrant odor. The concept here is taken from the Torah regarding Noah who *“walked with God”* versus Abraham who *“walked before God.”* Was Noah only as good as the standards of his time? Does the standard that we live by become flexible depending upon the generation that we live in? Taking the example from Noah, his generation was very wicked, so much so the Lord destroyed all life that had breath from the face of the earth. Yeshua spoke of the last days before his return, *Matthew 24:37* and *Luke 17:26*, that it would be as in the days of Noah. Destruction would come upon the people without notice. Could Yeshua also have been referring to the state of wickedness in these last days also? By simple observation, there are cultural indicators of an increase in wickedness, e.g. homosexuality, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, suicide, rape, pregnancy, robbery, and assault, even terrorism, and mass murder, rumors of war and wars, etc. Based upon these indicators, the standard of justice, holiness, and righteousness in our culture is waning. Are the rabbis saying that righteousness is relative to a persons cultural setting? Should our righteousness be judged based upon the state of the culture today as compared to 100, 200, or 300 years ago?

Noah, according to the Scriptures, was just and good according to the standards that were prevalent in his day. For this reason the Torah emphasizes that Noah was *“faultless in his generation.”* His level of righteousness was antithetical to the moral expectations of his generation. Abraham on the other hand sought to proclaim righteousness and the one true God to all the world. According to the Rabbis, in *Talmud Bavli Yoma 28b*, Abra-

ham walked before God preparing the world to be ready for the greatest enlightenment of all, the giving of the Torah. As a result of this interpretation on Abraham's life, the rabbis say that Abraham fulfilled the Torah in his proclaiming righteousness to the world. Abraham's righteousness was the result of his love and faith in the Lord and His promises. This is exactly what the apostles taught in the Apostolic Writings. The Apostle Paul said the following concerning righteousness in *Romans 10:5-6*:

Romans 10:5-11

10:5 For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. 10:6 But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: 'Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), 10:7 or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).' 10:8 But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 10:9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10:10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 10:11 For the Scripture says, 'Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.' (NASB)

Paul makes a clear distinction between the “*righteousness that is by the Law*” and the “*righteousness that is by faith.*” The difference between these two types of righteousness is found within this week's Torah portion and the comparison between Noah and Abraham. We are not told that Noah was given a set of commands to obey. Therefore, when the Scriptures say “*Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God,*” Noah walked in righteousness and justice because he loved the Lord God Almighty and believed in Him. Similarly with Abraham, he was not given a command to proclaim righteousness to the nations; his proclamation of righteousness to the world was based upon his love and faith in the Lord in heaven. The apostle Paul agrees with this in *Romans 4:1-3* when he states his understanding of Abraham, that Abraham was not justified by works, he was declared righteous through faith. Paul said, “*What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*” (*Romans 4:1-3*) These men are our examples, to live our lives by faith, because we love the Lord choose to walk in His ways. According to the Torah, God's ways are peace, love, mercy, righteousness, justice, holiness, and innocence. The level of righteousness according to the Torah is not supposed to change with regard to the extent of wickedness of a given generation. God's righteousness and standard for living is eternal. With the help of Yeshua the Messiah and the Holy Spirit of God, we are given the power to walk in His ways, to abide in the Messiah (in Christ), even in the midst of an evil generation. Praise the Lord!