

## Bringing meaning to life

Parsha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BERESHIT

NOACH

LECH LECHA

VAYERA

CHAYEI SARA

TOLDOT

VAYETZEI

VAYISHLACH

VAYESHEV

MIKETZ

VAYIGASH

VAYECHI



# NOACH

## 02 THE RIGHTEOUS CHILD

In the short passage concerning the ark's construction, the Torah emphasises no less than three times that: Noah did 'exactly as God had commanded him'.<sup>1</sup> Following God's orders meticulously, turns out to be a double-edged sword, ultimately leading to Noah's demise when he is left to his own devices. Amidst his passive adherence to God's orders, Noah absolves himself of any personal responsibility and initiative. He builds the ark perfectly, yet having developed a sense of passivity, since God had not explicitly told him to get on board, 'he did not enter the ark until the waters compelled him.'<sup>2</sup> While some may see relying on the command of God alone as an admirable expression of faith, Rashi explains it as a lack thereof.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, even when 'Noah knew that the waters had subsided from upon the earth...'<sup>4</sup> he did not have the fortitude to leave the ark until God explicitly commanded him to do so.<sup>5</sup>

**Why** did Noah not pray for those around him or encourage them to mend their ways, given his inside knowledge of the imminent flood? Perhaps the answer is simple – Noah does not do anything, because God never instructs him to. If he had been told to, he would have acted differently, but he does not initiate unless he has received a direct instruction.

**Noah** is the antitype of other central characters in the Torah who, in contrast to his passivity, take active steps beyond that which they are commanded. For example, Joseph the dreamer amasses reserves of food for an entire empire – a stark contrast with Noah who builds the ark for his family alone. Moses asks to be wiped out along with his people rather than allowing them to be wiped out alone.<sup>6</sup> He is the antithesis of Noah, who never once questions God's justice but rather passively follows His word.

While Noah's ark is mentioned twenty-five times in the Torah, the only other single time the term 'ark' is used in the Torah is in reference to the one that was selflessly built by Moses's family, risking their lives to save his,<sup>7</sup> subtly highlighting the contrast between these two stories.

In an approach similar to that of Moses, and in direct contradistinction to Noah, Abraham screams out to the Heavens, challenging the seeming injustice of God's plan to destroy the people of Sodom, 'Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?'<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Judah explains the difference between Noah and Abraham in simple terms:

This may be compared to a king who had two sons, one grown up and the other a child. To the child he said, 'Walk with me,' but to the adult, 'walk before me.' Similarly, to Abraham, whose moral strength was great, [He said,] 'walk before Me,' of Noah, whose strength was feeble, 'Noah walked with God.'<sup>10</sup>



**Childhood** and adulthood are two formative and necessary stages in the healthy development of an individual. However,

**To remain a child when one is called upon to 'grow up' is to abdicate responsibility.**

God may accept and even desire obedience as 'step one', but this is by no means the ideal for the long term. Abraham, Moses, Joseph and many of the greats throughout history become true leaders as they continue to develop throughout their lives. Noah, in contrast, does not advance from compliance to initiative and consequently debases himself when left to his own devices.



**We** are expected to follow God's commands like a child does to a parent; however, like a child who matures in his relationship with his parents, we are then expected to intuit and act.

The transition from 'walking with' to 'walking before' represents the graduation from spiritual childhood to spiritual adulthood. It is this task of spiritual maturation that requires us to go beyond passively accepting our fate, to actively pursue our destiny.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Genesis 6:22
- <sup>2</sup> Genesis 7:7
- <sup>3</sup> Rashi *ad loc.*;
- Midrash Tanchuma ch. 6*
- <sup>4</sup> Genesis 8:11
- <sup>5</sup> Genesis 8:16
- <sup>6</sup> Exodus 32:11
- <sup>7</sup> Exodus 2:5
- <sup>8</sup> Genesis 18:25
- <sup>9</sup> Genesis 17:1
- <sup>10</sup> Genesis Rabba 30:10

### Parsha Fact:

Following the flood, the rainbow became an eternal symbol that God would not destroy humanity in its entirety and to this day, we say a blessing each time we see one, remembering this covenant.



*Next week in Lech lecha:*

*The twenty-first century presents technological advances that offer an unprecedented level of instant gratification. This reality raises expectations and chips away at our ability to learn patience. One might easily and mistakenly assume the same expectations of immediacy with regard to one's relationship with religion – providing us with a quick fix and yet in parashat Lech Lecha, God teaches Abraham the importance of perspective and the value of patience in a unique way which we will learn about next week...*

שבת שלום