



Noach: Crisis & Confidence

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

"These are the generations of Noah, Noah was a righteous man he was perfect in his generations; Noah walked with God"

(Genesis 6:9)

The fate of man and his world were sealed. Death and destruction would come in the form of a flood which would obliterate all that God had created. It was Noah who was chosen from all humanity to be the savior, to be the second Adam from whom the world would regenerate and start anew. Yet the text conveys mixed messages regarding Noah's piety. On one hand we are told he was righteous; however, when we look at the verses that follow we see nothing extraordinary or exceptional in his behavior and actions. This leads to a rabbinic debate regarding the true nature of Noah's spiritual identity. Some explain that Noah was a "relative" *tzaddik* (righteous individual). Compared to the rest of this immoral and corrupt society he was righteous, but had he lived in the company of truly righteous men his identity would have been eclipsed by their true sanctity. This is why the above-quoted verse says that Noah was "perfect in his generation." Others explain that Noah was an "absolute" *tzaddik* – after all, if he could maintain some level of piety in such decadent circumstances imagine what he could be have become with fellow co-*tzaddikim*.

This tension surfaces again just a few verses later:

And Noah went in and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him into the ark because of the flood waters *(Genesis 7:7).*

Rashi explains that Noah was *m'kitanei emunah* (small or lacking in his faith). God had already commanded Noah to enter the ark. Yet, he only entered when the rising flood waters forced him to seek refuge. Rashi understands this unwillingness to enter the ark when commanded as a fundamental lack of faith in God.

I have always been troubled by this interpretation of Rashi. The Torah calls Noah a *tzaddik*, the Torah calls him a *tamim* (complete) and now we are going to say he is lacking in faith! How are we to understand this harsh criticism of Noah?

The great Chassidic master, Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740-1809) offers a novel insight. The Rebbe explains that when Rashi says, *Noach m'kitanei emunah haya* (*Noach was small and lacking in faith*) – he is not referring to Noah's belief in God; rather he is referring to Noah's belief in himself. The Rebbe makes an amazing observation – why didn't Noah pray for his generation to be saved? Why didn't Noah go out and preach to the masses? Why didn't Noah do something to try to salvage some greater remnant of humanity? Because he felt powerless, he felt insignificant, he saw himself as no better than anyone else and so he figured if he was going to be saved surely others would as well. He waited outside the ark until the waters forced him in because he assumed others would be joining him. Noah lacked faith in himself; he failed to realize that he was chosen because he was special and unique. Had he chosen to act he could have done more. Even if he would have been unable to reverse the Divine decree and save humanity, perhaps, he could have salvaged a few more souls. Perhaps, he could have petitioned God for a little more time to allow humanity to repent and change. But when you don't believe you are significant, when you don't believe you can accomplish something great, when you lack confidence in your ability to influence your circumstances, you simply sit back and wait for life to direct you.

Noach m'kitanei emunah haya, Noah lacked faith in himself. Noah was a great man. If only he had realized how great. If only he had recognized his full potential. If only he had believed in himself who knows how the story would have ended.

There is an important lesson for us contained in these ancient words. It is not enough to believe in God, you must also believe in yourself. Too many people journey through life feeling helpless and frustrated. We fail to see the good we possess, we fail to see the progress we have made, and we fail to see the power and potential that lies, dormant within. There are some things in life we cannot change – but many more that we can. Let us find the courage to believe in ourselves and begin to build and shape our life and our world.