

Social Influence, and Noah’s Splendid Isolation

“Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age” (6:9)

“You alone have I found righteous before Me in this age” (7:1)



Noah was undoubtedly a righteous man. But the Rabbis noted that Noah is always described as righteous “in his age”. What, they wondered, does this qualifier indicate? Was he only righteous **relative** to the corrupt generation in which he lived (but objectively not so perfect)? Or perhaps, Noah’s righteousness manifested itself in his formidable ability to retain his personal morality notwithstanding the degenerate and violent society that surrounded him; perhaps it is an accolade which indicates how uninfluenced Noah was, impermeable to the awful state of his environment.

The topic we will discuss this week will, I hope be quite relevant to teenagers and to us all:

- What is the relationship between us and our social environment?
- How much do our friends and community influence us?
- Is the influence positive or negative?
- If we are enveloped by negative influence, should we isolate ourselves or is it better to work to improve the society in which we live?
- Maimonides writes:

“A person who lives in a place where the norms of behavior are evil ... should move to a place where the people are righteous ...

If all the places with which he is familiar ... follow improper paths ... he should remain alone in seclusion...

If [society is] wicked and sinful and preclude him from residing there unless he mingle with them and follow their evil behavior, he should withdraw to caves, thickets, and deserts [rather than] follow the way of the sinners...” (Mishne Torah, Deot 6:1-2)

- Do you agree with this statement? Would it be true in communist Russia? In Nazi Germany? Under what circumstances is such a policy justified?

Some Background thoughts. Noah and Moses.

There is a strain in rabbinic thinking that is critical of Noah, seeing him as a flawed *Tzaddik*. One relevant text is the opening comment of Rashi¹. Another is the following Midrash that offers an

¹ Rashi to 6:9 “**in his generations**”: Some of our Sages interpret it [the word בְּדֹרֹתָיו] favorably: How much more so if he had lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have been even more righteous. Others interpret it derogatorily: In comparison with his generation he was righteous, but if he had been in Abraham’s

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intriguing compare & contrast between Moses and Noah:

“R. Berechia said: Moses is more special than Noah. Noah moved from the status of “a righteous man” (6,9) to “a man of the soil,”(9,20), whereas Moses began as an “Egyptian man” (Ex 2:19) and progressed to become “A man of God”(Deut 33:1)...” Bereshit Rabba 36:3

With its attention to fine textual detail, the Midrash notes that Noah - the man who is introduced as an “*Ish Tzaddik* - a righteous man,” is given a different title in chapter 9. There he is called “*Ish Adama* - a man of the soil” as Noah plants a vineyard and gets drunk from its wine. Our closing image of Noah is one in which he lies, drunk and naked in his tent; an “*Ish Adama*” - not a particularly positive scene for a *Tzaddik*. In contrast Moses grows from a simple Egyptian prince to the greatest prophet we have known. Noah’s life is one of decline; Moses is a life of advancement.

Why do the Rabbis compare Moses and Noah? The two man have several points of comparison:

1. They both float on water in an ark - a “*Teiva*”.
2. In both cases, the ark is waterproofed with pitch (see 6:14 and Rashi there).
3. They both spend 40 days and nights detached from the world. (Interestingly with both Moses and Noah, the forty days are preceded by 7 days of preparation see Gen 7:4 and Ex 24:16)

But the strongest contrast is this. They are both given the same offer – Moses with the Golden Calf (Ex 32:14) and Noah with the Flood (Gen 6:17) - that God will destroy their people and they alone will survive and become the seed of the future.

But here begins the difference. Moses rejects God’s invitation and advocates for the survival of his people. In contrast, Noah accepts God’s offer and allows his generation to be destroyed. And here we get to the essence of the problem. Moses SAVES his generation. Noah never prays for his generation. When God instructs him to build an ark, he never argues that humans should be saved rather than animals. Noah is an insular *Tzaddik*. He is personally righteous, but he is locked into his capsule – the *Teiva*.

Meshech Chochma comments:

There are two types of divine service. One is a person who withdraws and isolates oneself in full devotion to God. The second is someone who serves the community, and prioritizes communal concerns over personal interest. One would think that the individual who secludes him or herself would advance to great heights, and that the person involved in the community would experience decline... However, Noah lived in isolation – he didn’t influence his generation although he was called a *Tzaddik* – and he fell from his high stature to become a “Man of the Earth” ... whereas Moses ... reached the ultimate level of perfection.”

generation, he would not have been considered of any importance.” [Sanh. 108a, Gen. Rabbah 30:9, Tan. Noah 5]

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Moses frequently disregarded his own needs; He sent his family away while he led the Exodus. Noah saves only his family. And yet, Moses, who devotes his energies to others grows; whereas the insular Noah declines.

- What interactions make us grow?
- Do energies dedicated to the community infuse us with greatness or sap our intensity?
- When is serving the community effective; when is there a need for insularity?