
פרשת נח

פרק ו פסוק ט

אַלֶּה תוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלְּךְ־נֹחַ:

רש"י

בְּדוֹרוֹתָיו: יֵשׁ מְרֻבּוֹתֵינוּ דוֹרְשִׁים אוֹתוֹ לְשִׁבַּח, כֹּל שֶׁכֵּן שְׂאֵלוֹ הָיָה בְּדוֹר צַדִּיקִים הָיָה צַדִּיק יוֹתֵר. וַיֵּשׁ שְׂדוֹרְשִׁים אוֹתוֹ לְגַנְאִי, לְפִי דוֹרוֹ הָיָה צַדִּיק, וְאֵלּוֹ הָיָה בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם לֹא הָיָה נִחָשׁב לְכָלוּם:

מושג

בְּדוֹרוֹתָיו: יֵשׁ מְרֻבּוֹתֵינוּ דוֹרְשִׁים אוֹתוֹ לְשִׁבַּח... וַיֵּשׁ שְׂדוֹרְשִׁים אוֹתוֹ לְגַנְאִי

Translation:

There are those of our Rabbis who explain this as a praise... And there are those who explain this in a derogatory fashion.

Explanation:

Noach was most certainly a righteous man by any standard. By adding the words 'in his generation' the Torah is telling us something about Noach's relationship to his peers and how this relationship would have affected both himself and others in a less evil environment. The opinion that seeks to praise his approach understands that Noach did not close himself off towards trying to influence others, but rather saw himself as an open bottle of strong perfume in a foul smelling place. Such a bottle will give off its sweet scent, and placing it among spices will only serve to enhance its fragrance. The second opinion understands that Noach feared the influences of his generation, and thus closed himself off towards any relationship with them. He saw himself as a weak perfume which much be placed in a sealed barrel to prevent foul smells from ruining its fragrance. While the seal is perfectly justifiable, it will prevent the fragrance of the perfume from escaping even when it is removed from the foul environment. Therefore, such an approach is generally to be avoided.

Looking in the Pasuk:

The Midrash quoted by Rashi is bothered by the qualification 'in his generation'. Why would the Torah add this? In addition, the end of the Pasuk which tells us that Noach walked 'with Elokim' seems to be telling us something about Noach himself.

NOTES

The source of Rashi's comments is a מדרש תנחומא which teaches:

בדורותיו ולא בדורות אחרים, רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה חד אמר תמים היה בדור המבול ובדור הפלגה, שאלו היה בדורו של אברהם אבינו לא מצא ידיו ורגליו, משל לחבית של אפרסמון שהיתה מונחת במקום המטונף במקומה ריחה נודף, שלא במקומה אין ריחה נודף, וחד אמר תמים היה בדורותיו כ"ש בדורות אחרים, משל לצלוחית של פלייטון שהיתה מונחת במקום הטנופת ריחה נודף כ"ש אם היתה מונחת במקום הבושם.

A second similar source¹ is found in the (סנהדרין קח.) גמרא which teaches:

אמר רבי יוחנן: בדורותיו, ולא בדורות אחרים, וריש לקיש אמר: בדורותיו, כל שכן בדורות אחרים. אמר רבי חנינא, משל דרבי יוחנן למה הדבר דומה? לחבית של יין שהיתה מונחת במרתף של חומץ, במקומה ריחה נודף, שלא במקומה אין ריחה נודף. אמר רבי אושעיא: משל דריש לקיש למה הדבר דומה? לצלוחית של פלייטון שהיתה מונחת במקום הטנופת, במקומה ריחה נודף וכל שכן במקום הבוסם.

It seems that both opinions agree that Noah was a צדיק; they argue what his status would be had he lived in the generation of אברהם אבינו. Would he have been even greater had his environment been stronger, or alternatively, would he be considered mediocre at best compared to a better generation?

It is interesting to investigate over which point the two opinions differ. It seems rather obvious that a person's environment affects the way they act. Is it, therefore, not apparent that Noah would have been greater in a more righteous generation? Also, why is there a need to bring a משל in both the גמרא and in the תנחומא to the two opinions? What does the משל add?

Upon examination the משלים seem unnecessarily complex and uneven. The opinion which looks at Noah negatively compares him to a barrel of אפרסמון that gives off a pleasant fragrance only when compared to its foul smelling surroundings, but does not do so when not in such surroundings. If we were to continue logically with the second opinion, it should say that if the אפרסמון gives off a pleasant fragrance when it is in foul surroundings, it would certainly give off a pleasant odor when not in the foul surroundings! However, the second opinion in its משל makes two seemingly unnecessary changes: First, it changes the barrel of אפרסמון to a flask of פלייטון². Second, not only does it change how we look at Noah (as a barrel of אפרסמון or as a flask of פלייטון) but it also changes how we look at the generation of אברהם. The first opinion sees it as simply במקומו, a benign environment, while the second opinion sees it as being placed amongst spices, as a positive environment. Should not their opinions be a reflection of נח alone, and not of how they perceive אברהם's generation?

In short the equations representing the two opinions look like this³:

לגנאי: חבית אפרסמון במקום הטנופת (ריחו נודף) ---- שלא במקום הטנופת (אין ריחו נודף)
לשבח: צלוחית פלייטון במקום הטנופת " ---- במקום הבושם (כל שכן ריחו נודף)

And, finally we might wonder: How is it that a barrel full of אפרסמון would give off only a weak scent, discernible only when compared to bad smells⁴?

¹ Since the גמרא does not mention אברהם whereas the תנחומא does, I attribute Rashi's comments to the latter.

² As far as I can discern both are perfumes, the difference between the two being that פלייטון is more expensive and carries a stronger fragrance.

³ Interestingly, the משלים found in the גמרא follow the same strange pattern, the only difference being that the גמרא replaces the אפרסמון במקום הטנופת with חבית של יין במקום החומץ, both conveying an identical sentiment.

⁴ In truth in the גמרא the same question might be asked regarding a barrel full of wine. How is it possible that a barrel full of wine gives off almost no scent? Interestingly, in the מדרש רבה the wine in the barrel is קוסס, almost spoiled, and therefore almost no better than the vinegar. But, the תנחומא does not mention this at all, leaving us to wonder why the wine does not give off a stronger smell.

Before we answer, we must deal with perhaps the most glaring difficulty our Musag presents: The (בבא בתרא קכג.) גמרא wonders how it is possible that the Torah, which is careful to not even speak negatively about impure animals, would disparage Leah by telling us that her eyes were רכות.⁵ The גמרא answers that those words are coming to praise Leah, as her eyes turned soft from the tears she shed at the prospect of marrying Eisav. Therefore, we may ask, why would anyone try to read a negative sentiment into the Torah telling us that Noach was a צדיק בדורותיו? Why would we take this laudatory comment and turn it into a criticism? This is especially true given that a positive explanation was readily available!

It would be convenient to explain the two opinions along the nature vs. nurture debate. If a person's nature is the primary determinant of his behavior then Noach would have been the same person even in a more righteous generation and only considered a Tzaddik in relation to his peers. If however, nurture and environment are the primary determinants, then Noach would have been even greater had he lived among more righteous people. While this might explain the different understandings of the Pasuk, it does not answer why חז"ל saw a need to bring משלים to describe each opinion and why the Torah would seek to disparage Noach.

The addition of the משלים is coming to teach us not to understand the argument as one opinion stating that Noach was truly a Tzaddik and the other maintaining that he was only a Tzaddik on a relative scale, but did not measure up on an absolute scale. Rather, we may explain that it is clear that the Torah is coming to praise Noach. He is to be lauded for remaining righteous in a generation of sinners. Noach would have been a Tzaddik in any generation on any scale. Of this there is no doubt. However, the question is how did he do it? How did he manage to ignore the pernicious influences of his peers? To this there is an argument: One opinion is that he did so by insulating himself, by closing himself off to all that transpired around him, effectively shutting out the siren call of idolatry and immorality that surrounded him. According to the second opinion, Noach led a righteous life by steeling himself against outside influences even while leaving himself open to influencing others⁶.

The two opinions both understand that the Torah, with the additional word לדורותיו, is not coming to provide an evaluation of Noach – as the Torah would most certainly not disparage a Tzaddik - but of his approach. According to the first opinion, the Torah is teaching us that this approach was praiseworthy only in his generation, a generation in which Noach could not have positively influenced his generation. But as a general approach towards a Tzaddik's responsibility to his generation it is לגנאי, it is to be avoided. For in a generation where the people could be influenced for good, such as the generation of אברהם, Noach's approach would be worthless. In the words of the Tanchumah: לא מצא ידיו ורגליו. A Tzaddik who remains closed within himself adds little to the world and almost negates the reason for his existence, as Rashi writes; לא היה נחשב לכלום. On the other hand, according to the other opinion, which believed that Noach was open to influencing his neighbors, the Torah is coming to praise not only Noach but his approach as well. It is teaching us that one must do as Noach did and try to influence others even in the most evil of environments⁷. For even though he was unable to have an impact on his peers, in another setting his impact would most certainly have been felt.

⁵ ועיני לאה רכות, מאי רכות? אילימא רכות ממש, אפשר? בגנות בהמה טמאה לא דבר הכתוב, דכתיב: (בראשית ז') מן הבהמה הטהורה ומן הבהמה אשר איננה טהורה, בגנות צדיקים דבר הכתוב?

⁶ This argument follows two schools of thought found in the Midrashim. Some learn that Noach did try to chastise the people but simply did not succeed. Others learn that Noach did not truly try to change his peers.

⁷ This idea is powerfully conveyed in the גמרא (שבת נה.) which tells of Tzaddikim who were punished for not trying to influence their evil generation. The גמרא concludes that even though Hashem knew that their admonishments would have been ignored, they were still punished because they did not try.

This explains what the משלים were trying to convey and why according to the negative opinion Noach was compared to a barrel of אפרסמון while according to the positive opinion he is compared to a flask of פלייטון. The difference between the two opinions is not only whether we look at Noach as אפרסמון or פלייטון, but rather whether we view him as a barrel or as a צלוחית, a flask⁸. A barrel is sealed tightly while a flask is not.

If we compare Noach to a sealed barrel we are saying that he saw he saw himself like the אפרסמון in a barrel placed in a foul smelling setting. In order to ensure that the surrounding odor did not affect its contents, one would seal the barrel. Of course, this would also result in the fragrance of the אפרסמון being sealed in as well. While this might save the אפרסמון it would rob all those near the barrel of its fragrance even when it is removed from the foul odor. This would, in effect, defeat the purpose of אפרסמון, which is created to provide a pleasant fragrance. The משל very cogently draws a comparison to a Tzaddik and his purpose.

If however, we compare Noach to a flask, we are saying that he was open to the effects of his environment, therefore allowing the environment to impact him directly and significantly. At the same time the perfume in the open flask gives off a sweet scent when compared to foul smelling objects and certainly would do so if placed near sweet smelling objects, as they would enhance its smell as well. (The sealed barrel, however, would in no way be improved by being placed among spices and its faint fragrance would certainly be completely negated.) There thus seems to be an additional lesson here as well. The Tanchumah seems to be inferring that by opening oneself up to the influence of others one might actually be influenced for the good, much the same way the spices would enhance the fragrance of the perfume. Many times we spend so much time worrying about how others might influence us badly that we lose sight of the fact that many who are מקרב others are frequently inspired by those they seek to influence.

We now understand as well why according to the negative opinion Noach is compared to אפרסמון while according to the positive opinion he is compared to פלייטון. For we might ask: What is it that might cause the Tzaddik to choose one approach over the other? The answer is that it would depend on how the Tzaddik viewed himself. If he viewed himself as vulnerable to the influences of others he might feel it necessary to build walls that could protect him⁹. However, if he were to build up his fear of God to the level where negative influences would not affect him then he would feel comfortable building bridges that would connect him to others. I believe this is the difference between the אפרסמון and the much stronger smelling פלייטון. When placing אפרסמון in a place of foul odor one would be careful to seal the barrel. However, when placing פלייטון in the very same place one would not deem it necessary to seal the receptacle as the strong fragrance will not be adversely affected.

The similar משלים provided by the Tanchumah and the Talmud thus provide us with both a description of Noach's approach towards the people of his time, and why he felt it necessary to utilize one approach over another. The Muasg thus guides us as to the levels of righteousness towards which we should aspire and the resulting obligation we have to others.

⁸ At this point we may explain the change from אפרסמון to פלייטון was simply a result of the fact that they did not fill barrels with פלייטון, a stronger and more expensive perfume.

⁹ The difference between אברהם and נח is spelled out clearly in the second half of the Pasuk which tells us את האלקים התהלך נח, whereas by אברהם we are told אשר התהלכתי לפניו. Rashi, quoting the מדרש רבה, explains that the Pasuk is telling us that Noach required Divine assistance to withstand the influences of his generation.