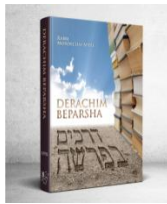


דרכים בפרשה נח

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אלה תולדות נח נח איש צדיק תמים היה בדרתיו את האלקים התהלך נח “*These are the generations of Noah — Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations; Noah walked with Hashem.*”

בדרתיו— Rashi, quoting Chazal, notes two very different ways to understand the word **בדרתיו**. Some of *Rabboseinu* interpret it to Noah’s credit — *kal vachomer*, if he was a tzaddik even in such a corrupt generation, how much greater would he have been in a generation of tzaddikim! Others, however, interpret it to his discredit — that only *relative* to his generation was he considered righteous; had he lived in the time of Avraham Avinu, he would not have been regarded as anything exceptional (Sanhedrin 108a).

At first glance, this seems surprising. We are taught to always seek the good in others. The Mishnah in *Avos* (1:6) instructs, “**והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות**” — judge every person favorably. If the Torah itself calls Noah a *tzaddik tamim*, why would Chazal choose to characterize him as **לא היה נחשב לכלום**— of no importance?

Even more puzzling: Chazal in *Pesachim* and *Bava Basra* note that the Torah is exceedingly careful with its language. Rather than call a non-kosher animal *tamei*, the Torah uses the softer expression **אינו טהור**— “not pure.” And that principle, they note, is learned from our very *parshah*! If the Torah is so sensitive even with animals, how could we so quickly find fault in a person — especially in one the Torah itself describes as a *tzaddik tamim*?

And yet, the truth is that Noah is the *only* individual in all of Tanach explicitly called *tzaddik*. That’s no small title. So why do some voices among Chazal still read the pasuk critically?

A simple observation can already shed some light. Rashi writes that *Rabboseinu* interpret it to his credit — but when mentioning those who interpret it negatively, he omits that word. Perhaps, as some point out, only the *Rabboseinu* — the true chachamim — spoke positively; the negative view came from others.

The Apter Rav zt”l, as related to me by R’ Zale Newman, offers another beautiful thought: the one who judged Noah unfavorably was Noah himself. He looked back

and said, “*If I am such a tzaddik, why did I not manage to bring even one person to teshuvah?*”

Perhaps, though, there’s another way to understand it. If we look at the Torah itself, what do we actually know about the man Noah? Not much. He “walked with Hashem.” He was a *farmer*, a man of the earth — **איש האדמה**— human and imperfect, as seen later in the episode of the vineyard. He was also a man who “*found chein b’einei Hashem.*” That’s about it. There’s no mention of greatness in Torah knowledge, no leadership, no open miracles. And yet — through Noah, the entire world was saved.

Unlike the stories we heard as children about tzaddikim who learned *Bavli* and *Yerushalmi* backwards and forwards by the age of six, Noah was simple, ordinary. Perhaps *davka* for that reason, he’s the tzaddik that *regular* people can relate to — the one who shows that even a simple person can accomplish extraordinary things. He reminds us that greatness can come from anyone who stays true to Hashem, regardless of his past or his stature .

It’s also striking that in the Gemara, the two views about Noah come from *Rav Yochanan* and *Reish Lakish*. Rav Yochanan reads it as a discredit; Reish Lakish as a compliment. We know their story: Reish Lakish had once been the leader of the bandits, until Rav Yochanan drew him close and brought him to Torah. Perhaps that background explains their perspectives. Reish Lakish, as a *baal teshuvah*, could only see the greatness of a man who rises above his surroundings; to him, Noah could only be seen as a tzaddik, and *chas veshalom* to even mention anything of his past. Rav Yochanan, involved in *kiruv* his whole life, viewed it differently: he saw in Noah the simple man who, though limited, still rose to the level of Tzaddik in Hashem’s eyes.

Accordingly, Rav Yochanan made sure to mention that he was nothing special and yet, look what became of him. He focuses on mentioning the fact that Noah was just a regular person, because as he demonstrated with Reish Lakish, from even a regular person, we can end up singing “Noach was a big Tzaddik”.

מרדכי אפפל, Good Shabbos,