

Last week's parashah went from the creation of the world to its imminent destruction. After creation, the garden, the expulsion, Cain, Able and subsequent generations, Parashat Bereshit closed by saying that humanity's wickedness had become so extreme that Hashem regretted creating humans, and resolved to destroy the world. Only Noach, says the last line, found favor with Hashem.

Parashat Noach opens with this verse:

Gen 6:9:

אַלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלְקֵדָנֹחַ :

This is the line of Noah.—Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his generations; Noah walked with God.—

What does it mean for a person to be righteous, “blameless in his generations”, when the world is full of evil?

Sanhedrin 108a:

§ With regard to the verse: **“These are the generations of Noah; Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generations”** ([Genesis 6:9](#)), Rabbi Yoḥanan says: Relative to the other people **of his generation** he was righteous and wholehearted, **but not** relative to those **of other generations**. **And Reish Lakish says: In his generation** he was righteous and wholehearted despite being surrounded by bad influences; **all the more so** would he have been considered righteous and wholehearted **in other generations**.

Ramban interprets it as: The Passuk mentions that Noah was free of guilt and complete in his innocence, to let us know that he deserved to be saved from the deluge because he didn't deserve any punishment at all, for he was perfect in his vindication from crime.

Or Hachaim: The word אלה describes the limited value of Noach's good deeds. They sufficed only to save himself. The additional word בדורתי further underlines that Noach did not succeed to make penitents out of his peers. [but he adds] Noach's righteous predecessors all had other righteous people to model themselves after, something that did not apply to Noach. He grew up surrounded only by wicked people. The word אלה therefore also has a positive connotation in that it sets Noach's pious conduct apart from all those who had preceded him.

So we see in the commentary tradition an emerging ambivalence about the nature of Noach's "blamelessness." When the whole world is wicked, what does righteousness mean? The rabbis are uncomfortable, and perhaps, we ourselves might be as well, with the idea of a righteous person's whose deeds serve to preserve their own well-being but do nothing to help the rest of humanity.

When the world is full of wickedness, is not active intervention required to be considered righteous?

At the same time, even the same texts that make this uncomfortable point back away from condemnation of Noach. They hedge. They acknowledge how very challenging it must be to hold oneself blameless when one is surrounded by wickedness.

Note particularly that in the text from Tractate Sanhedrin, it is Rabbi Yohanan who assumes that Noach's blamelessness wouldn't have been particularly noteworthy in another time. Rabbi Yochanan, who spent his life as a Torah scholar, assumes that Noach's behavior would not have been different in a different context. It is his *chavruta*, his study partner, Reish Lakish, a former bandit or gladiator turned Torah scholar, who says, no way: Noach's own moral imagination was limited by his circumstances. With better influences, he would have been even more amazing! Reish Lakish, of all people, would know something about the influence that context and peers exert on moral behavior.

We do not know how the character of Noach would have been shaped differently had he lived at a time when the world wasn't full of violence. Had he lived in such a time, the story wouldn't have been this story of flood, deliverance and rebuilding. It is relatively easy, sitting in a synagogue, embedded in a community with coherent moral norms, to assume the posture of Rabbi Yochanan and to say it's nothing special to be blameless. It is certainly compelling to point out the moral failure of a redemption that carries one's own family away and leaves everyone else around to drown.

And I know I am not the only descendent of Shoah refugees in this community, of people who in fact took boats over the water, out of danger, and didn't wait – *couldn't* have waited for everyone else to make it out.

All of which is a pretty stark way of saying that I think Noah was doing his best. Whether he would have been better in a different generation is immaterial to the story, ultimately: these are the generations when he existed, he was working with what he saw and knew, and he was judged in and against his context.

He lived in a time that was described in this way in verse 11: “ וַתִּשְׁחַת הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵי יְיָ : הָאֲלֵהִים וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס :

“The land was wasted before Hashem, and wicked, lawless behavior filled the land.”

Now, you might say that verse could pretty much be describing our own times. We are in a moment when the earth seems utterly devastated, when plague is ravaging our culture, when the structures that we have looked to for leadership seem to be collapsing in corruption.

So I want to point out how much better we have it than Noach. We live in an organized society and community. We have, in the US, a constitution that sets out the aspirations of how democracy should function, flawed, but being ever refined. We have structures of accountability.

As Jews, we have Torah, and inheritance of wisdom of those how came before us, ever evolving. We have Shabbat. We have each other.

Like Noah, ultimately, all we can do is our best. Like Noah, we can hope to be judged in the fullness of the context we inhabit.

But I think that the commentator's discomfort with Noah's blamelessness is a challenge to all of us: If Noah could manage to maintain a moral compass and keep himself apart from wickedness, in a time, as Or HaChaim says, when there were no positive influences to be found, how much can we call from ourselves? For Noah, it was enough to hold himself apart from wickedness – at least, it was enough to save himself and his family.

But we who are not persecuted, we who have so much community resource – when we look back on this historical moment, if we hope to be able to describe ourselves as “righteous people; blameless in our generation” – what might it take to merit that? Where do we set the bar? And how would we like to hold ourselves accountable?

All we can do in this moment – in any moment – is our best. What does that look like?