

In Search of Inner Calm: Thoughts on Parashat Noah

[View PDF](#)

By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Torah describes Noah in glowing terms, as "tsaddik tamim", righteous and pure. Of all the people in his generation, only Noah is singled out for being a good, upright person who walked in the ways of God. The rest of society had become horribly corrupt, evil beyond salvation.

How did Noah feel living in such a society? How did others relate to him?

I imagine that Noah was universally despised by the members of his society. They must have been irked by Noah's refusal to follow in the idolatrous and sinful behaviors that were the norms for everyone else. Noah must have been ostracized as a self-righteous, arrogant man who thought himself too good to mingle with others. People don't like a "goody goody" who shuns their way of life.

Did Noah have any real friends? Could Noah trust anyone? Perhaps his family members provided "safe space" for him; but everywhere else he was a pariah, a non-conformist, a righteous and pure person in a world of evil and impurity. Such isolation can surely be devastating. How did Noah find the inner strength to cope? How did he remain righteous and pure, when it would have been so much easier and so much more comfortable to go along with the corrupt and sinful patterns that prevailed in his world?

One answer is suggested in the opening verse of this week's Parasha: "Noah walked with God." Noah stayed focused on his relationship with God. This single-minded spiritual sense allowed him not to be shaken or troubled by what humans say or do. Noah was not seeking popularity or comradery with people; he was seeking to be righteous and pure in the eyes of God. By keeping focused on the eternal, he was able to transcend the ugliness and evil of everyday life in his society. As the Talmudic sage Akabia ben Mahalalel taught: it is better to be deemed a fool in the eyes of humans, rather than to be a fool in the eyes of God for even an instant. Ultimately, we are not answerable to our fellow human beings, especially not to the evil ones: we are answerable to God, and must live with that idea clearly in mind.

The last verse in Parashat Bereishith states that "Noah found favor in the eyes of God". The great 16th century sage, Rabbi Elazar Azikri--drawing on a classic rabbinic interpretation--notes that the name Noah is also a Hebrew word meaning "calm", "serene". The verse can be understood as follows: one who is calm and serene finds favor in the eyes of God. The way to maintain inner strength, balance and righteousness is to maintain a spiritual equilibrium, a deep inner calm that is not shaken by external events or words.

This is very difficult to achieve. It is not easy to ignore insults, mean words, vicious behavior, sinfulness. It is not easy to feel isolated from fellow human beings in order "to walk with God". It is far from simple to maintain inner calm and serenity when the world around is so filled with corruption, lies and cruelty.

Now perhaps we can better understand the greatness of Noah. Now perhaps we can better understand the greatness that is demanded from each of us.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)