

Noah's Advice: Thoughts on Parashat Noah

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By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In sorting out the genealogical information in the early chapters of Genesis, it turns out that Noah and Abraham were alive at the same time. Abraham was 58 years old at the time of Noah's death.

(Interestingly, the numerical value of the name of Noah is 58!) Did Abraham and Noah know each other? The Torah does not so indicate, and Midrashic literature sheds little light on this question. Here are some of my speculations on this topic.

Abraham would surely have been interested in meeting the venerable old sage who had survived the deluge. In his own search for God, Abraham would have had no better teacher than Noah who God had specifically described as a righteous and pure man. Noah had first-hand experience with God. Indeed, Abraham was a tenth generation descendant of Noah...so Noah was Abraham's great, great etc. grandfather. It would have been strange if Abraham did not know Noah in person.

Noah could have told Abraham about the events leading to the great deluge, in which only Noah and family were spared. He could have described God's sadness about the sinfulness of humanity, how God felt compelled to wipe out the wicked people and re-start the human adventure with Noah and family. As an old sage looking back at his lifetime experiences, Noah might have told Abraham: "What was gained by God's destroying the wicked in the flood? Are people after the flood any better than they were before the flood? Isn't humanity still plagued with idolatry, immorality, violence, theft? If people were supposed to learn the lesson that wickedness is punished...they obviously did not learn it!"

"So what is to be done?" Abraham would have asked. "Is humanity condemned to eternal self-destruction and godlessness?"

"I've thought a lifetime about this," Noah would have answered. "Apparently, God brought the deluge not because He expected humanity as a whole to improve. He is far too wise to expect that. He brought the flood to teach us that it is fruitless to imagine that everything would be different and better if only all the wicked would be destroyed. Things won't be different or better. Floods and vast punishments don't change the basic nature of humanity. So instead of fantasizing about

improving humanity by wiping out the idolaters, infidels and sinners, one should rather seek to teach righteousness to people, one by one, day by day, soul by soul. This is painful, frustrating, tiresome...but there is no other way.”

“But, grandfather Noah, what is to be gained by struggling against human immorality? Aren’t we better off just hiding ourselves away in our own safe enclaves, and let humanity corrupt itself as much as it wishes.”

A Midrash sheds light on this: “There were four pious ones at the dor haflaga [generation of building the tower of Babel]: Shem, Ever, Noah and Abraham. Shem, Ever and Abraham hid themselves away...but Noah stood up and endangered himself for the sanctification the Name; he warned the [wicked to cease] but they did not listen to him (Torah Sheleimah, R. Menachem Kasher, vol. 1, p. 500, no. 40)

The Midrash envisions the young Abraham as hiding himself away rather than confronting the idolatrous builders of the tower of Babel. Also choosing to hide were Noah’s son Shem, and his great-grandson Ever. These righteous men thought it was pointless to confront the wicked; they did not believe they could succeed. But the old man Noah endangered himself for the sake of Heaven; he chastised the wicked and suffered their abuse. At the end, though, Noah’s efforts were futile. The evil persisted in spite of Noah’s impassioned words.

Abraham, Shem and Ever would have come to Noah afterward: “You see! Your protests were worthless. You endangered yourself and aggravated yourself to no avail. The wicked do not listen to the chastisements of the righteous.”

Noah would have answered: “I did not chastise them because I thought they would listen. I chastised them so that there would be a record that someone stood up against evil. I chastised them...but really I was chastising myself. I wanted to be sure that I myself would not forget what righteousness and morality are. By protesting against evil, I was reminding myself and strengthening myself so as not to let myself slip into the pervasive evil that surrounds us. Hiding is not a valid option for righteous people. If we don’t stand up for truth and Godliness, then the voice of truth and of God will be silenced altogether in our world.”

Noah would have looked into Abraham’s eyes: “My grandson Abraham, if I have learned anything in my long life it is that God demands that all of us do our best to stand for truth, goodness and morality. I have learned that threats and punishments are generally ineffective in getting people to improve themselves. I have learned that the human condition is innately contaminated with egotism,

jealousy, violence, and godlessness. God's great experiment in creating humanity was to see if there would be special souls in each generation who could keep the flame of holiness and truth alive. Such people must be heroic, patient, steadfast in their commitment. Such people must reach out to others...and teach by precept and example. They will gain adherents, even if the majority of humanity remains mired in destructive behavior. This is your task, grandson Abraham. Go out and change the world. Go out from hiding. Confront evil directly. You will suffer greatly in the process...but you will justify your own purpose in life. You will be fulfilling God's command. The future of humanity depends on you, Abraham, and on others who will follow your example."

Abraham would then have kissed Noah's hand and receive his grandfather's blessing. "Thank you, grandfather Noah. You have taught me something important. You have taught me everything I need to know to face my future."

[Angel for Shabbat](#)