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## **Noach: A courageous, human, and ultimately tragic figure**

by rabbi judah dardik

*Bereishit/Genesis 6:9-11:32*

*Maftir (Rosh Chodesh) Bamidbar/Numbers 28:9-15*

*Haftorah: Isaiah 66:1-24*

A courageous, human, and ultimately tragic figure. Let us begin with the good. Right in the middle of introducing Noach's family, the Torah describes him as "a righteous person," and "perfect in his generation." A virtuous hero, selected by Hashem to save the animals and continue the human race after the world is deemed unfit to continue.

Yet the end of his story is quite sad. The Torah tells us (9:18-24) of our protagonist's emergence from the ark, and that afterwards he "became a man of the earth, and planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine, made himself drunk," and rolled around the ground naked in a stupor. The drunken father is disgraced by his own son Canaan, and we then hear little else of Noach after this.

So that's it? We glimpse our hero drunk and disgraced and he never does anything more worth noting? What happened to the great role model who saved humanity?

Let us go back to the beginning in search of clues. We first meet Noach at the tail end of the prior portion. The Torah tells us (5:28-29) that Lemech had a son and named him Noach, saying that "This one will bring us relief ("Yinachameinu"- [Noach]) from the work and anguish of our hands, from the soil that G-d has cursed."

The Midrash Tanchuma explains that for some time until Noach's birth, the land had been cursed by Hashem such that people would plant a measure of wheat or barley, and thorns would grow up in their place. But upon Noach's birth, things went back to normal and what was planted was what grew. Also, on the date of Noach's birth, time saving tools like the plow were invented.

All of this was noted at Noach's baby naming. People were ecstatic, and attributed it to his merit. Here was the "golden child" who would save them, and they named him accordingly. That is how he grew up. Everyone knew him as the young man who had and would save them. He was the future.

So it certainly came as no surprise when G-d Himself spoke to Noach and informed him that he would be the one to assure the continuity of humanity after mass destruction. Humanity wasn't worthy of survival, but Noach was. No shocker there; he was "righteous" and "perfect," just like everyone always said that he was.

So this dutiful and righteous servant of Hashem did exactly as he was told and built an ark. He gathered pairs of every animal, in order to save them. He was a savior, after all. Through his family, there would be life after the flood.

However, Noach may not have been prepared for the realization after the flood. The realization of emerging and finding that there was no one left. That he and his family were quite alone. Yes, they knew it in theory. But that could not prepare them for actually seeing it with their eyes. Coming out of the ark and seeing that there was nothing left of all that was, none of the people that he grew up with, none of the great trees that once stood, none of the cities.

At that moment, Noach met a profound sense of failure. Since the day that he was born, he was told that he was a savior for humanity, and he had failed. They were all dead. How could he live with himself anymore? Yes, our species would live on through him, but what of all the people who looked to him (ever since he was born) to save them? Sensing the failure to realize the stated purpose of his existence, it is no wonder that Noach chose to drink; to dull his awareness and his senses, to choose oblivion.

Feeling that one has failed at the task that one's parents and community expected of them is one of the worst feelings imaginable, and Noach couldn't handle it. This may be why the Torah spoke of Noach's character in the midst of telling us of his family. From his earliest youth, his identity had been imposed upon him by the expectations of family. For Noach, the relationships between parents, children, and expectations were poisonous and the cause of his perceived need to escape.

Every single one of us is a child of parents, and some have children of their own. On the one hand, we need to express our values to children. If they don't know what we stand for, how can we expect them to take those values into account? Yet while doing so, we need to take care not to set expectations so specific that they are unlivable. They need the general direction of their parents, but when the expectations are too specific we run the risk of crushing children under the weighty sense of failure when they do not fulfill them.

And for ourselves- what expectations of our parents do we carry on our shoulders that simply weren't "for us?" It's time to let it go and discover our children and ourselves for who we are, and not who others wish we were.

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