

From the Ohr HaChayim

by Jacob Solomon

G-d warns No'ach to escape from the impending destruction:

G-d said to No'ach: "The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with robbery... and behold, I am about to destroy them from the earth. Make yourself an ark..." (6:13-14)

What was No'ach's response? **"No'ach did all that G-d told him to do" (6:22).**

He did as he was told, all under G-d's direction. No less, no more. He built the ark according to the stipulated precise dimensions. Full obedience. But no initiative. No'ach did not (following the text and most Midrashim) plead for mercy, as Avraham would for the people of S'dom, and Moshe would - on several occasions - for the straying Israelites.

The Midrash (B'reishit Rabba; No'ach 10) points to fundamental difference between No'ach and Avraham. It compares them to a king's two sons, one who was a child, and the other who was already grown up. The king let the adult continue walking in front him, allowing him to use his initiative based on his previous experience of what his father, the king, wanted. The child, however, had to stay with king.

Avraham was the adult: "Be wholehearted; walk before me" (17:1). No'ach was the child: "No'ach walked with G-d."

Avraham, in his wholeheartedness, made his own decisions based on his understanding of what G-d wanted. When G-d told him that he planned to destroy S'dom, he approached G-d in protest: "Would You punish the righteous with the wicked?" (18:23). And G-d responded to him, even though He did not change His mind. But No'ach, in similar circumstances, kept silent. The promise that the ark would save only him and his family was good enough for him.

Thus No'ach was a righteous man in his generation only: in Avraham's society, he would not have been recognized as a man of distinction (one opinion brought by Rashi to 6:9).

The Ohr HaChayim, however, presents a different picture of No'ach and his situation, which contrasts with the first explanation.

When G-d told No'ach of His plans of destruction, he immediately communicated His plans for him: "I am about to destroy them from the earth, Make yourself an ark..." The decision was made. No room for negotiations, complaints, or pleas for mercy. In contrast, G-d communicated His intentions to Avraham in less decisive terms: "There is a great

outcry from S'dom and Amora; their sin is very grave. I must go down and see whether their deeds indeed merit destruction..." (18:20-1). That indicated a possible doubt, which Avraham used as cue to protest: "Would You punish the righteous with the wicked?"

Similarly, Moshe used the very situation of the Israelites after the spies as his cue to protest. In both cases, he invoked G-d's recent great involvement with yetzi'at mitzrayim, the nations' malicious joy would Israel be destroyed, and the merits and promises made to their ancestors, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. And unlike Avraham, Moshe was mostly successful.

The Ohr HaChayim's explanation indicates that as people, we should focus in engaging on projects that have chances of success and not waste energy getting involved in things that are entirely beyond our control. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr put it:

God grant me
the *Serenity*
To accept the things
I cannot change;
Courage to change
the things I can;
And *Wisdom*
to know the *Difference*. 