

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**

In this together

In 1961, the winner of the Tony for best Broadway musical was *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. It was revived (twice), made into a movie and adapted for television. The faces and sets changed. The one thing which remained the same was the self-serving cynical, attitude of the leading man, J Pierrepont Finch, who rises from window washer to titan of industry. But he does sing one truly uplifting set of lyrics,

'There is a brotherhood of man,
A benevolent brotherhood of man,
A noble tie that binds,
All human hearts and minds into one
brotherhood of man.'

This anthem to empathy is his expression of repentance for all his previous underhanded shenanigans. It's a catchy tune, but is its message of human unity true? Let's look at this week's Torah reading to find out.

Parshat No'ach is always a challenge, because we're not sure how to relate to its hero. No'ach is an enigma to the rabbis, and, apparently to Hollywood, if you saw Russell Crowe in the role you'll understand. Steve Carell was better. Rashi famously records our Sages ambivalence: Some Sages interpret his righteousness favorably... and others

interpret it derogatorily (B'reishit 6:9). Does No'ach belong in the pantheon of Bible heroes? Jury's still out after all these years. It's possible that some scholars arrived at their verdict based on certain ethnocentric considerations. After all we're called the descendants of Avraham, while the rest of mankind are called B'NEI NOACH. Is the negativity surrounding No'ach a direct result of his not being the founder of our clan? I don't think so, but it will take a while to develop the idea.

There are two major sin scenarios in our parsha, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. What's the difference between the generation of the Flood and that of the Tower of Babel? The simplest answer is that the generation of the Tower survived. They may have been exiled, but at least they lived. Why? Normal Torah logic would dictate another outcome. After all, what was the sin of the generation of the Flood? CHAMAS, which we translate as violence, but it seems to suggest armed robbery. But what about the people of the Tower? According to most rabbinic interpretations, they were rebelling against God. Perhaps, even picking a fight with the Creator. That's curious, because normally the punishment for idolatry or blasphemy is more severe than for robbery. What merit did the people of Mesopotamia have which No'ach's generation lacked? In a word: UNITY.

It's recorded in Midrash Raba: However, these people from the Generation of the Dispersion (DOR HAFLAGA) loved one another, as it says, 'And it was that

the entire world was of one language and one set of words (B'reishit 11:1)', therefore a major portion of them survived. Rebbe said that great is peace (SHALOM, perhaps 'togetherness' in this context) because even if the Jews worship idols but there is Shalom amongst them, it's almost as if (KIVIYACHOL) God can't rule over them, as it says, 'Efrayim is addicted to idols, but let him (HANACH) be (Hoshei'a 4:17).' From here we can learn that great is Shalom and hated is disunity (B'reishit Raba 38:6).

The generation of the flood was everyone for themselves. While the generation of the Tower was 'all for one and one for all', even though their goal was reprehensible.

No'ach was a victim of his times. The weltanschauung overwhelmed him. The concept of joining with others and influencing them was totally alien to him. There was no template for cooperation. He's criticized for being a ZADIK IM PELTZ (a righteous man in a fur coat and not sharing the warmth), because he made no effort to disseminate his ethics to others, but without a tradition of community there was no chance of No'ach becoming a Chabad Shaliach.

After the Flood, a lightbulb (I guess in those days it was a candle.) went on in the minds of people. 'We're in this together', they began to think. The Flood was an equal opportunity destroyer. They concluded that there must be cooperation or this kind of disaster could happen again. Actually,

Rashi quotes a Midrash that the purpose of the Tower was to hold together the heavens and prevent another Flood. Shades of Isaac Asimov's great science fiction tale Nightfall, that the Flood would be a recurring catastrophe. Cooperation and unity seemed a necessity.

There was one observer who put the spiritual morality of No'ach together with the sense of community of the generation of the Tower. According to the dating system of the verses in B'reishit, this young man was 39 years old when No'ach died, and 48 when the people were dispersed from the Tower. And, of course, I'm referring to Avraham. Our Alter Zeidie was the one who combined righteousness with the sense of human unity, and spread ethical monotheism far and wide. Of course, Avraham was ultimately greater than No'ach, but he had the advantage of knowing No'ach and experiencing the dispersion.

In our era the world is shrinking at an alarming rate. The results of human behavior patterns affect other continents and hemispheres at frightening speed. An oil spill or reactor meltdown is not a local event. The food we eat, the air we breathe, the water we drink are global concerns. I'd like to believe that we children of Avraham, especially in Israel, add more to solutions than to problems, like with desalination, drip irrigation, solar power, and afforestation. But we need the global village.

As J Pierrepont Finch sang,

'Your life long membership is free,

Keep a-giving each brother all you can.

Oh, aren't you proud to be in that
fraternity,

The great big brotherhood of man?'

If we don't join the brotherhood, there
may not be a fraternity much longer.

We must learn from Avraham to be
righteous on a global scale, or we may
closer to the Flood than any shining
Tower. 🗡️