

Exit the Ark! by Yedidya Bejell

The following is based on a Shabbat drasha delivered by my Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Eliyahu Blumenzweig.

“Remove my soul from confinement”

According to the Midrash, throughout his sojourn in the Ark, No'ach beseeches Hashem, “Remove my soul from confinement.” Nevertheless, Hashem denies No'ach's request and insists that he remain in the Ark for twelve long months.

But we have to wonder why No'ach wants to leave? After all, as No'ach obviously knows, there is not much of a world left outside the Ark.

Moreover, No'ach's “confinement and isolation” begins long before the MABUL begins. His entire generation is irrevocably corrupted, and hence, HaKadosh Baruch Hu decides to destroy every living thing. No'ach, however, is secluded from this environment.

As the first pasuk of this week's parsha states:

“No'ach was a righteous man, perfect in his generations.” (B'reishit 6:9)

Undoubtedly, No'ach is aware of the gap between himself and his contemporaries and therefore lives an isolated life.

Living in an Ark

Yet, we must note that - in stark contrast to Avraham - No'ach does not pray on his generation's behalf. In other words, to a certain extent, his isolation is also self-inflicted. Clearly, No'ach is not immersed in the life around him. Effectively, he is encased within an “emotional” Ark - even before he is physically enclosed within wooden walls and surrounded by infinite amounts of water.

In light of the above, we can understand why Hashem specifically employs an Ark to rescue No'ach and his family.

However, as noted above, once he is safely ensconced in the physical Ark, No'ach yearns to leave. Why? What causes him to change his approach to the outside world?

Rashi (Breishit 6:14) asks: “Many [methods of] relief and rescue are available to [HaKadosh Baruch Hu]; why, then, did He bother [No'ach] with this construction?”

We have already observed that Hashem selects a means of salvation which reflects No'ach's antediluvian way of life.

But why is No'ach forced to cool his heels inside the Ark - even after the mabul has ended? Why does HaKadosh

Baruch Hu compel No'ach to remain inside for twelve months?

As No'ach comes to realize, serving as the generation's sole "righteous man" comes at a price. A callous indifference to the fate of one's peers and an unwillingness to influence them condemns one to isolation.

Thus, when this seclusion is taken to the extreme - i.e. the physical Ark - No'ach undergoes a change. He suddenly feels a need to connect with his surroundings and hence pleads, "Remove my soul from confinement."

In the merit of tzedaka

According to the Midrash Shem Tov (Tehilim), Avraham asks Malkitzedek - who, according to our tradition, is No'ach's son Shem - why he and his family merited exiting the Ark. In response, Malkitzedek explains that their merit was a result of the tzedaka they had done for the animals in the Ark. In other words, No'ach and his family are not permitted to leave the Ark until they prove that they had learned to care for the animals onboard.

Avraham subsequently concludes that he should do the same thing, albeit for humans rather than for animals. Hence, as the pasuk states:

"And he planted an eishel in Be'er Sheva" (B'reishit 21:33).

Rashi famously teaches that according to one opinion, "eishel" refers to an inn for lodging. In this way, Avraham does chessed for all the passersby.

A lesson learned

We have seen that No'ach is spared his generation's tragic fate because of his isolation. Yet, that very same sense of detachment also means that he is unable to exit the Ark. He realizes that no one else will be saved by the Ark, but yet he does nothing to change his contemporaries' destiny. Therefore, his salvation involves complete seclusion and confinement. Although he and his family have not been killed, they do not deserve to roam the earth. Instead, No'ach can continue his way of life locked up in a big box.

However, No'ach learns his lesson during his long stay in the Ark and is now ready to return to the world. He finally comprehends that being righteous also involves reaching out to others, and later, Avraham Avinu develops this foundation of chessed.

May we be privileged to maintain our inherent righteousness while serving as a beacon to those around us. 🙏