

Parashat Noakh 5781

Shabbat Shalom !! This Shabbat's Torah portion begins with the story of one *tsaddik* (righteous person) and concludes with the introduction and genesis of another *tsaddik* (Avraham, or Avram as he is originally named). The portion begins with the utter corruption of the entire world with the exception of Noah (*Noakh*, in Hebrew) and his immediate family. With the flood (*mabool* in Hebrew – there are two words for flood in Hebrew, *mabool* which refers to a flood caused by rain and *shitafo*n if the source of the flood is a body of water such as a river overflowing).

The opening verse of the portion says “These are the generations of Noah...” That phrase, “these are the generations of...” is a very common phrase in the Torah that introduces a genealogy. However in this instance, rather than telling us who Noah begot, it follows by saying that “Noah was a *tsaddik*, blameless in his generations; Noah walked with G!d.” This unusual content following the familiar phrase that typically introduces a genealogy begs to be interpreted. Among the traditional commentaries are that the “offspring” of a *tsaddik* are the good deeds that they do. The sages debated the implication of the phrase regarding Noah being a *tsaddik* in his generations. They compared and contrasted him with the *person* introduced at the end of the *parashah* i.e. Avraham. One side of the argument held that Noah was considered a *tsaddik* in comparison with all the depraved people in his generations. Had he lived at the time of Avraham he may not have been considered to be so *ay yay yay*. On the other hand, the argument was also made that in Noah's time, surrounded by corruption, it was much harder to be a *tsaddik*, so Noah deserves so much more credit. Then the sages dissect the phrase that Noah walked “with G!d,” whereas Avraham is said to walk “before G!d” i.e. Avraham didn't need G!d to “hold his hand” as it were.

One significant difference contrasting Avraham and Noah was that we don't witness Noah trying to avert the destruction by either pleading with G!d or trying to convince his generations to repent. In contrast we see Avraham in next week's *parashah* arguing with G!d over the fate of Sodom because there might be some righteous people in the wicked city that G!d is about to destroy. Noah does what he is told. Avraham argues on behalf of people.

There is, in fact, a genealogy in this Shabbat's portion that culminates in Avraham. We see how Avraham is eventually descended from one of Noah's three sons (*Shem*). Cana'an is

descended from another of the three sons (*Kham*). *Kham* is the one of the three sons that doesn't act with sufficient respect for his father after Noah gets *shikur* (drunk) from the grapes in the vineyard he planted after the flood has subsided. The name *Shem* is the source of the word "Semite" in Hebrew ("*shemi*").

Genealogy is often significant in the Torah – and in our lives today also. What do we carry on from the people who gave birth to us and who raised us – or of the generations that preceded our immediate parents? Personally, I never knew my grandparents because all four of them perished in the Holocaust, nevertheless, my parents gave me a strong feeling about the heritage my grandparents bequeathed to those that followed them. I'm sure that's true for most of us. My mother used to tell me that certain Jewish ritual things she kept, she did in memory of her parents. Their presence was invoked with the Friday evening candles, etc.

At the same time, each generation makes the traditions they inherit their own – either by continuing them and finding their own meaning in them, or abandoning them, or something in between. Every generation inherits the traditions of the past in a different context than the one in which the previous generation received them. There is no way we can convey the exact meaning something had for us to the next generation. The best we can do is try to make it as meaningful as possible for those who follow us. This is as true for a synagogue community as it is for a family. Each generation will leave its own unique stamp upon the traditions they inherit and, if they remain committed to it, pass them on in a somewhat different way to those who follow. The great Yitzkhak Luria (the *Ari*) (1534-1572) said that every Jew has their own letter in the Torah, which I take to mean, each of us has our own unique way of understanding the Torah: if we chose to engage with it. We each bring our own insights that no one else can have because each of us is *ekhad l'mino* (one of a kind). Shabbat Shalom !