



## On Being Good Enough

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### **Parashat Noah 5778**

The debate about Noah persists: Was he a great man or not?

The answer to this question not only teaches us about Noah but also gives us insight into what it means to be a good person and what it could mean to aspire to greatness. It enables us to appreciate that even when we struggle to do the right thing, and even if we don't always succeed in becoming who we'd like to be, we can be considered truly and even heroically righteous.

A single phrase serves as evidence both for and against Noah's claim to righteousness. The text says that "Noah was a perfectly righteous man in his generation" / "נח איש צדיק תמים הָהָה" / "בְּדֹרֵתוֹ" (Genesis 6:9).

Rashi explains that though this looks like generous praise, it is actually quite equivocal:

**רש"י בראשית ו:ט**

יש מרבתינו דורשים אותו לשבח, כל שכן שאלו היה בדור צדיקים היה צדיק יותר.  
ויש שדורשים אותו לגנאי, לפי דורו היה צדיק, ואלו היה בדורו של אברהם לא היה נחשב לכלום:

### Rashi on Bereishit 6:9

Some of our Rabbis read this phrase as favorable; if he had been in a generation of righteous people, he would have been even more righteous. And some read this as disparaging; he was righteous in comparison to his generation, but if he were in the generation of Avraham, he would not be considered anything.

On the one hand, the verse describes Noah as being a righteous man, an *ish tzaddik*. That seems like a pretty good indication of his greatness. He is, after all, a *tzaddik*. But on the other hand, his righteousness is qualified by the word *be-dorotav*—in his generation. He was only righteous when compared to his contemporaries. Perhaps if he had been in someone else's generation, perhaps if he were to be compared to Avraham, he would not have been considered worthy of this praise at all.

And in fact, Rashi continues to compare Noah to Avraham and concludes that Noah was, indeed, not that great.

את האלהים התהלך נח - ובאברהם הוא אומר (יז א) התהלך לפני, (כד מ) אשר התהלכתי לפניו, נח היה צריך סעד לתומכו, אבל אברהם היה מתחזק ומהלך בצדקו מאליו:

**Noah walked with God**—Regarding Avraham it says, **walk before Me, that I walked before Him**. Noah needed help to support him, but Avraham was strong and walked independently in his own righteousness.

Rashi's characterization of Noah is not encouraging. To him, Noah was a person of insufficient faith who “would not have been considered anything” when held up next to a truly righteous man. Noah, who is called the only righteous person in his whole generation, the person without whom all of God's creatures<sup>1</sup> would have gone extinct, is still only maybe, possibly, kind-of great. Noah is thoroughly and unremarkably average. Compared

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<sup>1</sup> Fish excepted.

to the bad people in his generation, he's pretty good! But compared to the righteous people of another generation, he is a nothing.

The debate thus settled, I'm left with two new questions. First, if the conclusion regarding Noah is that, in fact, he was not great, then why call him a *tzaddik* at all? Why does the Torah take pains to praise him for his righteousness if he is not noteworthy? And why should it matter to me that Noah wasn't that impressive? Why do we need to pass judgment on Noah at all?!

We need to look more closely at who Noah is in order to understand what his character teaches us. Rabbinic tradition speaks about three types of people—those classified as righteous, *tzaddikim*, those considered wicked, *resha'im*, and the truly average, *beinonim*. Noah is the exemplar of this third category; he is truly average. And it is Noah's averageness that is his most important quality and the key to Noah's righteousness. Noah is not called a *tzaddik* in spite of the fact that he is middling; it is because Noah is so average that he can be called a *tzaddik*.

The Tosefta<sup>2</sup> in Massekhet Kiddushin actually advises us to think of ourselves as average,

#### תוספתא קדושין א:יא

העושה מצוה אחת מטיבין לו ומאריכין [לו] את ימיו ונוחל את הארץ. וכל העובר עבירה אחת מריעין לו ומקצרין את ימיו ואינו נוחל את הארץ - ע"ז נאמר (קוהלת ט:יח) **והוטא אחד יאבד טובה הרבה**. בחטא יחידי שחטא זה איבד ממנו טובות הרבה.  
לעולם יהא אדם רואה את עצמו כאילו חציו זכאי וחציו חייב. עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע עצמו לכף זכות, עבר עבירה אחת אוי לו שהכריע עצמו לכף חובה. ע"ז נאמר **והוטא אחד יאבד טובה הרבה** [בחטא] יחידי [שעשה זה] איבד ממנו טובות הרבה.

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<sup>2</sup> An early collection of teachings and laws, roughly contemporaneous with the Mishnah.

### Tosefta Kiddushin 1:11

One who does a single *mitzvah* benefits himself, extends his own life, and inherits the Land. And one who commits a single transgression harms himself, shortens his life, and does not inherit the land and about him it says, “one sin(ner) will destroy a lot of good” (Kohelet 9:18). With a single sin, he lost many good things.

A person should always look at himself as if he is half liable and half innocent. If he does one *mitzvah*, good for him for he has weighted himself to the side of innocence. If he commits one transgression, woe unto him for he has weighted himself to the side of liability. As it says, “one sin(ner) will destroy a lot of good.” Because of one sin that he sinned, he loses many good deeds.

We see from here that the way to improve is to look at yourself as hanging in the balance. When you think of yourself as truly and specifically average then all that it will take for you to achieve the status of *tzaddik* is to do one single positive act. According to this teaching, understanding yourself as average is not about underselling yourself as mediocre, but about setting yourself on the precipice—one step away from falling, but also just one step away from greatness. When Rashi tells us that Noah is a *tzaddik* and also that he is average, Rashi is telling us that Noah is a particular type of righteous person. The kind of person who became a *tzaddik* because of just one deed, because he improved himself by just enough to be considered above average, even though he is fundamentally still just an ordinary guy.

Of course, even the single righteous act, making that one right decision can be daunting. And our ability to meet this challenge is aided or hindered by our estimation of our own capacity. The importance of having confidence in your ability to achieve moral and spiritual greatness is illustrated by a teaching of R. Yehudah in Massekhet Sukkah:

**תלמוד בבלי סוכה דף נב עמוד ב**

כדרש רבי יהודה - לעתיד לבא מביאו הקב"ה ליצר הרע ושוחטו בפני הצדיקים ובפני הרשעים.  
צדיקים נדמה להם כהר גבוה ורשעים נדמה להם כחוט השערה. הללו בוכין והללו בוכין. צדיקים

בוכין ואומרים היאך יכולנו לכבוש הר גבוה כזה?! ורשעים בוכין ואומרים היאך לא יכולנו לכבוש  
את חוט השערה הזה?!

### **Talmud Bavli Sukkah 52b**

As R. Yehudah taught: In the coming future, the Holy Blessed One will bring the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* (evil inclination) and slaughter it in front of the righteous and in front of the wicked. To the righteous it will seem like a tall mountain and to the wicked it will seem like a strand of hair. They will all be crying. The righteous will be crying and saying, “How could we possibly have vanquished such a tall mountain?!” And the wicked will be crying and saying, “How could we not have vanquished this strand of hair?!”

The shock that the wicked and the righteous exhibit when they are confronted with the “true” size of the evil inclination, the *Yetzer Ha-Ra*,<sup>3</sup> is instructive because it shows us how they became who they are, how they became righteous or turned evil. The righteous people are surprised that the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* is so huge because the secret to their success is that they have trained themselves to think of the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* as small and insignificant. They think of it as conquerable so they put in the effort that it takes to conquer it. The evil people, on the other hand, have given up. They think of the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* as so imposing an opponent that they give up without putting up a fight. They are so disappointed in themselves when they realize that in truth the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* is miniscule, and they are ashamed of their weakness.

However in reality, the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* is neither large nor small; the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* is exactly the same size as the person who confronts it. The *Yetzer Ha-Ra* is the same size that we are because the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* is, of course, us. We decide whether we want to do what’s right

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<sup>3</sup> The figure and the concept of the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* appears in many different forms throughout Rabbinic literature. Sometimes it is personified as a type of demonic force that compels people to do wrong and sometimes it is understood as our own impulse towards self-interest or greed. In this passage, where the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* is slaughtered, it appears in its more personified form, however in my interpretation of it, I am relying on the common understanding that it is a fictionalized manifestation of human capacity for wrongdoing.

and we decide whether or not we have the ability to do it. And it is up to us to decide whether we are up to the task of facing ourselves. Whether we are willing.

Doing the right thing is not easy, but doing the right thing is doable. Noah is well-matched by his challenge. The emotional and physical toll of the work that he has to do, almost kills him. As Midrash Bereishit Rabbah shares a harrowing, but illustrative image of how Noah lived in the ark:

בראשית רבה לב:יא

"וימח את כל היקום וישאר אך נח" - ר' הונא בשם ר"י: אך מיעוט שאף הוא היה גונח דם מפני הצידה:

**Bereishit Rabbah 32:11**

**And He wiped out all of existence, only Noah remained.** R. Huna said in the name in R. Yehudah, “only” minimizes [the scope of the verb]. Noah didn’t survive completely, for even he was coughing up blood because of the cold.

This *midrash* seizes upon a tiny detail in the description of Noah’s survival and exploits a classical rule of exegesis to uncover what was going on with Noah, inside of Noah, as he is surviving on the ark and saving his little world. Instead of writing “God wiped out all of existence and Noah remained,” the *midrash* understands that Noah “only” remained means that Noah *just barely* remained. The *midrash* sees Noah’s success as taking a tremendous physical and emotional toll on him. He was coughing up the blood of effort and the blood of anguish. He was doing only what he had to do, and even so, *just barely* succeeding at it. He does it with reluctance,<sup>4</sup> he does it with difficulty, but he does it.

Noah’s experience validates that it is so hard to do what is right. The example of Noah teaches us that it is also completely possible. And the expression the Torah uses for him even though he does just what he is asked to do and no more, is *tzaddik*. Noah isn’t an

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<sup>4</sup> See Rashi s.v. מפני המבול.

incredible person, but he finds grace in the eyes of God, וְנָח מָצָא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי ה' (Bereishit 5:6).

Asking whether Noah was great or not-great is exactly the same as asking whether the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* is large or not-large. When Noah steps up to do what he is called to do, he is a great man. So he is a *tzaddik*. If Noah allows himself to feel inadequate he will be and will be no better than the rest of his generation. If he is determined to do the right thing, then the *Yetzer Ha-Ra*, his will to do the wrong thing, shrinks. If he sees himself as weak in the face of his own propensity to do bad, he will falter.

The reason why Noah, a totally average person, is nevertheless called a *tzaddik* is so that we ordinary readers of the Torah will think to ourselves, “If that totally average person can be considered righteous, can be called a *tzaddik*, then so can I.” If a man with Noah’s small amount of faith and small amount of resilience was able not only to survive, but to save his whole generation, then so can we. Noah is relatable and Noah is emulatable.

The secret of Parashat Noah is that Noah is us. He is righteous in the way that we are. We may think we need to be something special or amazing in order to be considered great or even sufficient, but Noah teaches us that it’s okay to be average, to be doing the minimum, because the minimum is no small feat. Being good enough is so, so hard, and Noah also found it difficult. Doing a little bit better than who we are already can feel impossible, but Noah proved that it is not. And Noah shows us that the image of a *tzaddik* as someone who always does the right thing and for whom the right thing is easy and obvious is incorrect. That false and frightening image is a strategy of our *Yetzer Ha-Ra* to trick us into thinking that we are morally and spiritually inadequate, when just the opposite is true. We are one step away from greatness. Even if we’re not Avraham, we are Noah. Even if we need God’s support to keep us on the right path, we will have found favor in God’s eyes if we do so. We will be righteous.

There are so many reasons to feel inadequate to building the ark and to feel unworthy of

entering it. Just surviving, just being average, is so hard. But just as Noah found the inner strength and resolve to be the better person that God knew he could become, so too we take the single step, followed by the single step, followed by the single step, which is the path to greatness.

Wishing you a Shabbat of small, but significant, growth.