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Noach – Don't Slam the Door

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“When Noach left the ark, he fell to his knees and began to sob upon seeing the complete destruction of the world. He turned to God and said, ‘Master of the Universe, where was Your compassion, where was Your mercy? You should have exhibited greater compassion to Your creations?’ God responded, ‘Foolish shepherd, when I told you to build the ark, you should have advocated for humanity. When I told you that you were righteous, I was telling you that you had the power to make a difference. Yet, when it began to rain, you entered the ark with your family and closed the door on humanity. And now you ask about my lack of compassion?’” (Zohar, Noach 39:1)

A powerful conversation: Noach wondering what happened to the compassion of God and God wondering what happened to the compassion of Noach. There are many sources which highlight Noach’s lack of advocacy for his generation. It is easy to categorize Noach as self-centered and lacking compassion for the plight of the other. But this approach has always bothered me. After all, the Torah calls Noach a *Tzaddik*, a righteous man, a term that neither God nor the Torah use lightly. If so, how do we understand Noach’s behavior? Why didn’t he try to save the generation and lobby God on their behalf? Why didn’t he try to intercede and prevent the cataclysmic destruction of humanity?

The great Chassidic master, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) provides an incredible insight: *“Noach was completely righteous, he did not comprehend the ability to leave his righteous state, engage with the wicked and raise them up. He did not understand his ability to pray for them, help them discover their spark of goodness and holiness and allow them to rebuild.” (Likutei Halachos, Shabbos 7:69)*

Noach didn’t believe in change. Noach thought that the world had two different types of people – the righteous and the wicked. Once you chose a team, you had a lifetime contract. When Noach looked at his wicked neighbors he saw people who were broken beyond repair. Their only hope would have been God’s mercy and compassion. When God told him to build the ark, for He was going to destroy the world, Noach said “ok.” There was nothing to do, only God could save the day. And so, upon disembarking from the ark, Noach wags an accusatory finger at God and asks, “Where was your mercy?” God proceeds to explain to Noach his profound mistake. “People make bad choices and at times do terrible things, but they never lose the ability to change. Noach, had you believed in humanity’s capacity for change you could have gone out to the masses and taught them the error of their ways and the path to salvation. You could have inspired them and encouraged them to be more. But you didn’t. I told you of My plans, you accepted My words, built the ark and closed the door behind you.”

The Rebbe provides us a powerful perspective on the Parsha and on life. Noach was a pious and righteous man who didn’t understand the profound, cathartic power of change. At times, we too make the same mistake, assuming that who we are is who we will always be. Change is the most incredible gift given to us by God Himself. The ability to invent and reinvent oneself as many times as needed is a treasure, privilege and obligation. Humanity was lost because no one believed in the power of change. We must learn this lesson and remember that we each have the power to transform. Whether one need to change a behavior, a perspective, a relationship or a way of life – the power rests in our hands. May we find the courage and strength to use it wisely.