

## People in Our Time

This Shabbat, we read parshat Noach, the story of the great flood that destroyed all of humanity, but the real focus is not on the nameless and faceless personalities that are drowned by the deluge. Noach and his family are front and center. And, really, Noach is the one character of concern for us. As opposed to Abraham, who demonstrates no known attributes toward becoming chosen as God's agent, Noach is described in the Torah as '*Ish Tzaddik, Tamim*' a wholly righteous man. But the verse adds on a vague modifier – '*bidorotav*' – in his generation. (Gen 6:9)

The question that our sages asked and which Rashi cites: Does this modifier detract or enhance Noach's righteousness? He was righteous for a generation of villains, but were he to have lived in the times of Abraham, Noach would have been a person of little note.

Or, another reading of the modifier – in his generation – might be to enhance Noach's stature. Noach was righteous in his generation, filled with villains. Imagine what a person with such moral clarity in a generation when morality was more commonplace. He would have been a beacon of goodness.

Both of these theoretical readings of Noach's moral stature are interesting, but – to my view – they miss the point because none of us live a 'would-have-been' life. We are only who we are. The mishna implores us: In the place where there are none others, try to be the person. (Avot, 2:5) We will never be the best at anything we do. Think of any talent you claim as your own or any achievement you take pride in – and then look around any room full of people – and imagine what talents are collectively in that room. Of the things which are most essential to who you are, there will almost certainly be a person as good, or greater, than you in that very thing; probably standing right next to you. That ought not discourage us; because at some time and place – that talent will have to rise to the occasion and your defining quality will be a buoy for the lost, shipwrecked and hopeless.

Towards the end of the Torah, Moses prepares the people for a hypothetical legal dispute. A matter that is too complicated for the region court which will need adjudication in the Supreme Court in Jerusalem. And the matter is to be brought before the 'judge of that day' to resolve matter – here too, 'of that day' modifies the judge. (Deut 17:9) Rashi explains that if this judge, of this day, is not of the same echelon or stature as the previous judge, you are still duty bound to accept the ruling. (cf Rashi, *ibid*) Our community leaders of the day, whoever they are, are our community leaders. Our parents are our parents; our teachers are our

teachers.

Noach was the person of his time, not of all time; he did not need to be. We must be the people of our time; that's what our world needs us to be.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach, Chodesh Tov,

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