

These are the offspring of Noach – Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generations. (6:9)

The phrase *b'dorosav*, “in his generations,” has given rise to much commentary. One is either righteous, or he is not. What does “his generations” have to do with it? *Rashi* cites a dispute among *Chazal* as to the nature of this phrase: Is it an accolade, meant to praise Noach? Or a deficiency, considering Noach to be righteous only in contrast to his generation? Some see Noach as a very righteous person who was able to withstand the extreme evil of his generation. Indeed, had he lived in the era of Avraham *Avinu*, Noach would have been even greater. Others view his righteousness through the lens of contraposition. He was a *tzaddik*, righteous man, only in contrast to the people of his time. Reading this *Rashi* begs elucidation. The Torah attests to Noach’s exemplary character, his ethical devoutness and unique moral compass. Why not leave well enough alone? He was a “good guy” – leave it at that. Why search for a way to paint his impeccable character in a deficient manner?

The **Alter, zl, m’Novoradok** explains that, indeed, both perspectives on Noach advanced by *Chazal* depict him as a *tzaddik*. The dispute is not concerning his level of *tzidkus*, but rather, concerning what motivated his righteousness. Some say that Noach wanted to grow spiritually, to grow closer to Hashem. He was self-motivated, because he understood the importance of a life of holiness and purity, a life of spiritual value in which morality is Heavenly-defined, not one based on human subjectivity.

The other position taken by our sages sees Noach choosing a life of piety because he was morally outraged by the behavior of his compatriots. When he saw how the members of his generation were steeped in licentiousness, moral corruption and avarice, he knew that he must distance himself from them as much as possible. Thus, both positions taken by *Chazal* applaud Noach as a *tzaddik*. Their opinions are contrasted only with regard to Noach’s motivation: Was it positive growth? Or a reaction to society’s revolting behavior?

The very fact that one who lives in a corrupt society, in an environment whose moral compass is maleficent, yet retains his distance from the common way of life, is in and of itself a commendable accolade. People are influenced by their environments. If one can fight against the negative pressure, he is deserving of praise and positive recognition. One’s good deeds are measured by the barometer of the challenges and obstacles over which he must triumph in order to maintain his spiritual status quo. The nature of man is to follow, to succumb to the allure of the society in which he lives. To confront and rise above the evil is meritorious. To suggest that he would be even greater under more conducive circumstances does not negate his present righteous status. It merely reinforces his present distinction.

Horav Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman, zl, augments this idea with a vignette cited from the *Sifrei Kabbalah* concerning a dialogue which ensued between *Horav Chaim Vital, zl*, and his *Rebbe*, the

holy *Arizal*. Rav Chaim asked a compelling question: How does Heaven view the *avodas hakodesh*, the holy endeavor/service, of the righteous Jews of that generation (sixteenth century) in contrast to the service performed by the holy *Tanaaim* and *Amoraim*, the *Gaonim* followed by the *Rabbanan Svurai*? Our *avodah* must pale by comparison to theirs. What value does our service have?

The *Arizal* replied with a story. The king of Egypt received a special gift from an admirer who was visiting his country: a parrot. This was at a time when it was absolutely unheard of to find anything that was not a member of the human species that spoke. People were amazed, as it was truly a unique gift. The *Arizal* questioned this phenomenon. What was so astonishing about a parrot speaking, more so than the ability of a human being to speak? The answer is simple: all humans speak. We take it for granted – despite the fact that it is a miracle. A bird, however, does not speak. To discover a bird that talks like a man is amazing!

The *Arizal* continued, “Herein lies the answer to your question. It is certainly true that our generation in no way compares to the previous generations. They were giants in a world inhabited with giants. Our generation is morally corrupt. The entire world has lost its spiritual and moral compass. Nonetheless, we go about our business serving Hashem, learning Torah as much as possible under the circumstances. True, our service and that of Noach are/were deficient in comparison to that of Avraham *Avinu*. The mere fact, however, that we are trying to make the effort to serve Hashem to the best of our abilities is every reason for praise.

Our generation has its challenges. Society from without has had a deleterious effect on society within, but we must overcome the challenges and obstacles. Hashem does not judge us in comparison to the generation of *Tannaim*, but according to our own individual potential, in our own unique environment, in our own particular circumstances. Indeed, every little bit that we do is as significant to – and valued by – Hashem, as if it were performed by the *Tannaim*.