

Noach was a righteous man, perfect in his generation. (6:9)

The *Talmud Sanhedrin* 108b relates that actually the decree to annihilate the *dor haMabul*, generation of the Flood, had originally applied to Noach as well. It was rescinded due to the *chein*, favor, Noach found before Hashem: *V'Noach matzah chein b'einei Hashem*, "Noach found favor in the eyes of Hashem" (*Bereishis* 6:8). The question which confronts the reader is whether or not Noach was worthy of reprieve. If he was not, why should "favor" alter his sentence? Since when does favor determine one's worthiness?

Our sages debate the integrity of Noach's virtue: Did it stand on its own accord, or was it relative to the rest of his generation? Was Noach righteous, despite the evil of his generation, or was he a *tzaddik* only in comparison to them? The *Midrash* indicates that Noach's spending an entire year in the Ark toiling 24/7 to feed its motley collection of passengers was, in and of itself, a punishment. Apparently, his level of righteousness was deficient.

Horav Pinchas Friedman, Shlita, cites the *Chasam Sofer* who posits that, in his own right, Noach was unworthy of being spared from the flood waters. He was guilty either of less-than-perfect virtue or not praying hard enough for the members of his generation. In any event, he was spared only because, relative to his generation, he was a *tzaddik*. Thus, although Noach was spared, he had to undergo a year of severe and painful toil as penance for his shortfall in regard to righteousness. Furthermore, it was necessary to set the correct standard for virtue and send out a message for the future: One's righteousness is not measured relative to others. He must personally be on a plane of virtue which is in its own right, exclusive of any comparisons to others, wholly perfect. Hashem could have easily saved Noach without employing the medium of the Ark. He did not, because he wanted Noach to achieve *tzidkus* status in his own right.

Rav Friedman explains that Hashem specifically chose Noach, who was a relative *tzaddik* (only in comparison with the evildoers of his generation), because this was the first *hatzalah*, deliverance, from death; thus, it would serve as the prototype for future *hatzolos*. *Maase avos siman labanim*, "The deeds of the fathers are a portent for the children": The first time Hashem does something sets the standard for parallel future events. Noach's deliverance from the raging waters of the Flood became the foundation-stone for all future deliverances in which Hashem's People would be spared. Therefore, in the future, whenever *Klal Yisrael* would be in dire straits which required Hashem's deliverance, He would rescue them even if their worthiness was only relative to the evil of their pursuers/oppressors/despots who sought to destroy them.

We must confront the reality that we often lack perfection. Times change; generations decline, with the spiritual achievements of today paling in comparison to that of yesterday. Hashem spared Noach. He will do the same for each generation whose spiritual success falls short. We may be far from perfect, but we are leagues ahead of the competition.