

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

The Torah introduces Noach as a person who was the paragon of righteousness and moral/ethical perfection. These attributes are especially laudable, given that he lived in the most depraved generation in history. Indeed, that is why the society in which he lived was wiped from the world. At this critical time, Hashem chose Noach to be the progenitor of the future human race. Having said this, we turn to *Chazal* (*Tanchuma* 5) who famously debate Noach's true level of righteousness. Was it relative to the evildoers of his generation? Had he lived in Avraham *Avinu's* generation, would his standard of righteousness have been considered lacking? Others contend that, since he remained righteous in a society so morally bankrupt and spiritually challenged, he was one of history's greatest *tzadikim*. Apparently, the challenges which he confronted only made him spiritually stronger and more resolute. He refused to bend and be swayed by the "fun" everyone seemed to be having. He was a moral and ethical person who believed in Hashem. He was resolute in not joining the crowd.

The fact that *Chazal* debate Noach's righteousness requires elucidation. Furthermore, since he was morally upright and the undisputed *tzadik* of his generation, why did no one – not a single person – take heed of his message? When a holy person tells you in no uncertain terms that a flood will wipe everyone out, someone should listen. In fact, when Noach was preparing to enter his Ark, they tried to prevent him from leaving. Apparently, they believed him sufficiently to obstruct his departure.

Perhaps the answer lies in a nuance added in the Torah's description of Noach: *ish tzadik*, a man who is righteous. Why could the Torah not have stated simply that Noach was a *tzadik*? Why was it necessary to add that he was an *ish*, man? The Torah is intimating a subtle, yet profound, characterization of Noach. *Ish tzadik* implies that, first and foremost, Noach was an *ish*, man, who functioned in a society and interacted with everyone. He dressed as they did; and, for all outward intents and purposes, he was one of them. It was in his *penimius*, internal nature, his intrinsic essence, that he was as different from them as night is to day. He was not a visibly otherworldly figure; he did not look like a *tzadik*. (In their uneducated minds, a *tzadik* must appear to be different.) Rather, he was an understated *tzadik*, a *tzadik* within the world.

This may explain the generation's blasé attitude to his *mussar*, rebuke, and warnings: "Who do you think you are? You are one of us! How dare you preach to us about our behavior?" They did not take his warnings about the upcoming flood seriously, because he lacked the aura that they felt a *tzadik* should manifest. He neither looked, nor behaved, like a prophetic outsider. He was a "good man," a real nice guy, but not a towering ascetic figure (as if they could perceive what a *tzadik* was). His righteousness was real, but not obvious in his appearance. He did not present as a threat to anyone, because, after all, he was an *ish* – one of them.

In contrast, Avraham *Avinu* (and later figures, the *tzadikim* of ensuing generations) reflected in his every movement, appearance and speech an elevated *kedushah*, holiness in his every endeavor, a

towering and refined spiritual consciousness. All of these *tzadikim* radiated *kedushah*, holiness, in their every endeavor. This does not negate that they were human like everyone, but the *tzadik* aspect is what people saw, respected, admired and even feared. They stood apart, and, for this reason, their presence challenged societal norms. Thus, when they spoke, people listened. They may not have agreed; and some might have challenged the message, but they did not ignore the speaker.

Noach was an *ish tzadik*, which allowed him to merge into society, but the drawback was that it was difficult for others to believe what he said, because, after all, he was one of them. Each of the others was a *tzadik* first and, only afterwards, one saw the *ish*. Every step reflected righteousness; everything about each of them was unavoidably and unapologetically distinct.

Noach engaged with society, yet remained a *tzadik*. In a world steeped with corruption, he remained, not only an *ish*, but a *tzadik* as well. This illustrates how great a *tzadik* he was, but it was also his impediment when it came to rebuking the people. Would it have been easier had he lived in a less corrupt society? Or would he have been ignored because he did not look the part? This question has long been debated. At the end of the day, a *tzadik* is a *tzadik*, regardless of appearances.

By definition, a *tzadik* is a person who represents *tzedek*, justness, perfectly aligned with all aspects of Torah and *mitzvos*. This includes character refinement, fear of Hashem and, of course, interpersonal relationships. The reader may ask: Is anyone perfect? Perhaps not, but the *tzadik* is one who strives for perfection. He is relentless in his pursuit of spiritual precision and flawless behavior pertaining to the sacred realm. One can peruse biographies of *gedolei Yisrael* and come across such great, refined individuals. I just read a tribute to the life of *Horav Mordechai Pogrimansky, zl*, who (as attested to by a number of *gedolim*) incorporated every possible virtue within himself. His knowledge of every branch of Torah was almost unlimited. This was combined with unfathomable depth of thought and clarity and a heart whose love knew no bounds. We have a plethora of vignettes concerning *Rav Mottel's* personal *yiraas Shomayim*. He strove to achieve the highest levels; yet, when it involved others who were not as stringent, his opinion was that what one expects and demands of himself should not be the barometer by which he measures others. This was true even when others sinned gravely against him. The following posture, which he manifested under such circumstances, is absolutely astounding.

Rav Mottel shared with a student that, prior to World War II, he had written a manuscript of *chiddushim*, original novella, on a number of topics in *Shas*. [His *chiddushim* were brilliant, and he was prolific.] Someone, however, helped himself to the manuscript and published it in America under his own name. *Rav Mottel* never divulged the name of the perpetrator (who obviously was not an emotionally well person). All he said was, "May he use it in good health." (Anyone who has ever written original *divrei Torah* or Torah literature will attest to the pain an author experiences when such a thing happens. It is not just the fact that someone took his paper, it was the fact that he had the temerity to sign his own name to it, almost as if the real author did not exist. When

someone claims an individual's thoughts as his own, it shakes his faith in people. *Rav Mottel* was above and beyond such feelings.)

I present another inspiring vignette. (I write this because it is so unheard of today.) *Rav Mottel* printed 500 invitations to his upcoming wedding. In the end, he did not send out a single one. He was apprehensive that he may have missed someone and that person would be offended. Better he should sustain the loss and send no invitations. *Rav Mordechai Pogrimansky* was a towering *tzadik*. As great as he was, his humility was even greater.