

This was the hardest divrei Torah I've had to put together in a long time. It's not hard like the parashot in Leviticus, where there's little to work in the text. By contrast, there's tons of good material here. But as I sat down at my computer, I couldn't shake the weight of the war off me. I'm sure you are having a similar experience. The war weighs us down, depresses us, interferes with anything else we try to do or even think about it. Yet we can't complain, because the people of Israel and Palestine have it thousands of times worse than we do. I didn't want to add to that depression today and don't feel I have words of wisdom to share anyway, so then I turned to the topic most modern commentators choose in relation to Parshat Noah – the issue of climate change. What can Noah teach us as we face the threat of another great flood? In the end, I also found that theme too overwhelming, and it left me almost comatose. (I keep thinking about the rainbow at the end of this week's parsha and hope that ours will shine before utter destruction ensues.)

But Shabbat was approaching, and I knew I had to come up with something. It's my style to try and find personal relevance from Tanach. Please bear with me and perhaps I will touch a chord – I hope so.

In this parasha, God identifies Noah as **the only righteous man** אִישׁ צַדִּיק (Genesis 6:9) in a world that is consumed by violence and corruption. God tells Noah to build a large wood ark and cover it with waterproof pitch, so it, and all it contains, can survive the great deluge of rain that is expected to come.

Ish Tsadik – okay. But the ONLY righteous man? Really? We have to trust that God can choose global leaders better than humans can choose them, and Noah was his man. (Where is God now that we need him again?)

But here is my point: how did God know that Noah was righteous – more righteous than absolutely every other man around? (I'm presuming that God didn't pay attention to women as potential candidates – although the world might have been a much different and better place if women could have been considered.)

Even after casting aside the potential of half the world's human population, what was God's evidence for picking Noah? In other words, what were God's key performance indicators? And, to bring this down to earth, how do we know who is really righteous?

Genesis 6:9 marks the beginning of the flood narrative, and it is here that we learn the most about Noah's life. We learn that Noah was a **righteous man, blameless in his generation, and that he walked with God**. (...repeat...)

- By saying Noah was righteous, we know that **he was obedient to God's commands** -- at least, as best as he was able and according to how he understood them at that time. Let's remember that God's commands were fewer than in later years – life was simpler back then. True, Noah

was told to build the ark, but the idea of 613 commandments – even the ten commandments – wasn't invented yet. So I have to ponder, against which commandments was Noah accountable?

- Second comes the criterion of Noah **being blameless in his generation**, standing out amongst the people of his day. While they were engaging in debauchery, we are told that Noah was living an exemplary life. Think for a moment: Aren't being blameless and being righteous two different things? Some translations use the same term *ish tsadick* for both meanings, but I don't see it that way. Being blameless is a low bar. To me, being blameless is simply the absence of something worse: definitely not a high standard of good behavior. Perhaps Noah was just the best of the lot at the time, and God decided to give him a chance. It was him or nothing: Kevin McCarthy or chaos.
- Finally, we are told that **Noah walked with God**, which suggests a vibrant and meaningful relationship with God – one that puts Noah in the same class as his great grandfather, Hanokh (Enoch) who (as we read last week) also walked with God. Yet for Hanoch, walking with God led to his death. Quoting Genesis 5:24: *Now Hanokh walked in accord with God, then he was no more, for God had taken him.* Noah must have known what happened to his great grandfather, but he still kept on the straight and narrow. Like Abraham with Isaac in the akeidah. Noah maintained total faith in God, beyond his own life.

Noah walked with God, but that leaves me a bit confused. Is having a close relationship with God the motivation, precursor, or cause of Noah's righteousness, or is it the outcome - the consequence or reward? Shouldn't God be saying: "if you act righteously, then you can walk with me and then we can have a relationship?" In that logical scenario, the acts of righteousness come first and only afterwards—after Noah did what God wanted – could the relationship ensue. But in this parsha, God doesn't require prerequisites (nor does He clairvoyantly look to the future when, after the Flood, Noah falls into the same misguided behavior as many of his former compatriots.) Was that PTSD? All we know is that God ignored all that. He simply pointed to Noah and said, in essence, *Come With Me*.

Where does this leave us? The parsha's explanation of Noah's righteousness is circular, almost solipsistic. Noah is righteous because God says so --which is what makes him righteous. These are terrible KPS – key performance indicators – since they are self-fulfilling and completely subjective.

I'm was having fun with this word-play but the real reason I want to dwell on the issue of righteousness today is because - to repeat the obvious -- we, too, live in an environment that is replete with violence, corruption, debauchery, and worse. Yet, every one of us know of some good people who stand apart – who resist the trappings of corruption, power and exploitation and therefore, we consider them as more righteous compared to others. One of my questions to you at the end is, how do you think we can elevate these relatively righteous people – relative compared to what is going on around them – to individually and collectively lead us out of the abyss?

Let me go back to the text. The Rabbis speculated on this issue, too. Rashi asked this question, for example, what if Noah lived in the time of Avraham, which is considered a less threatening and corrupt world, would God have picked out Noah then? The famous debate among the Sages is whether the phrase Noah being “perfect in his generations” ([Gen. 6:9](#)) is praise or criticism.. Some said that “perfect in his generations” means that he was perfect only relative to the low standard that was prevailing at the time. Had he lived in the generation of Abraham, they said, Noah would have been insignificant. Others said the opposite: if in a wicked generation Noah was righteous, how much greater he would have been in a generation with role models like Abraham.

If you subscribe to the contextual or relative-goodness theory, as I do, it can be argued that Noah was selected by God because he was good-enough, not perfect, but seemingly the best that God could find at the time. Personally I find that comforting, because no one is perfect. If we want perfection, true righteousness, like a righteous person in the time of Abraham as Rashi puts it, that can mean waiting until the Mashiach, which may as well be forever.

In my first draft of this drash, I started making connections between relative or imperfect righteousness in Noah’s time and in our own. Many of us could think of many leaders better than Netanyahu; similarly, most of us would have agreed that anybody would be better than Jim Jordan as House Speaker. In our elections, we often vote against the lesser of two evils. But add all this up, and that is maybe why we’re in the mess we’re in. We desperately need righteousness, even relatively so --someone **who is blameless in his or her generation** at least compared to most others – in order to **walk with God**.

I want to emphasize: Context matters. Woody Guthrie was a great man, maybe even righteous. But if Woody Guthrie were alive today, would he still be composing “This Land is Your Land” that ignores the historic claim of First Americans, on whose unceded land we sit today? If the plight of Native Americans was in Woody Guthrie’s consciousness, he probably would have written a different song. But now – a different time and place -- we see things differently.

We often hear this same debate regarding some of our greatest founding fathers – yet they were slaveowners. Given their time and context, do we still count them as righteous men?

To me, righteousness as a verb, an act, means pursuing the moral path. Not that you are already there – righteousness, in my view, is not static. The Hebrew words *tsadiqq* translates as righteous, but I like to view it a process – a becoming. Noah had to learn along the way, and so do all our leaders – and so do we.

Enough rambling from me: **How do you think of righteousness?** How does one BECOME righteous, or help others people become a little more righteous, given the troubled times we live in?