

Plowing for a Better World

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בראשית (ו:ח) - וְנֹחַ מָצָא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי יְקֹוֹק: ...

“And Noah found favor in the eyes of God.”

Wow. What a description. Is that not what every person would ever want to have written about them?¹ If only that could be written about me! What exactly was it about Noah that earned him this coveted status? A status that, as we know, God thought worthy enough to start the world over with him:

בראשית (ז:יח) וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתְּךָ וּבָאתָ אֵל הַתְּבָה ...

The Ramban explains that such a praiseworthy description was said of none other than Moses! That's quite a comparison. The reason for all this, explains the Ramban, is that “all his deeds was pleasing and pleasant” – that is, “naim” – pleasing to others, and “ne'imim” – pleasing in and of themselves. The Ramban ends here by saying that all this led to Noah being called “righteous and whole”:

רמב"ן בראשית פרשת בראשית פרק ו פסוק ח

(ח) וטעם "ונח מצא חן בעיני ה'" - שהיו כל מעשיו לפניו נאים ונעימים. וכן [נאמר על משה] "כי מצאת חן בעיני ואדעך בשם" (שמות לג יז), כדרך ויתן חנו בעיני שר בית הסוהר (להלן לט כא), ותהי אסתר נושאת חן בעיני כל רואיה (אסתר ב טו). והזכיר זה כנגד מה שאמר בדורו שהיו כל מעשיהם לעצבון לפניו יתברך, ואמר בו שהיה לחן בעיניו. ואחר כן סיפר מדוע היה טוב לפני האלהים, **כי היה צדיק תמים:**

On this title (toar) of “Tzadik tamim” the Ramban explains that Noah was perfect (tamim) in his righteousness (tzadik). But he is careful to note that this description applies to **actions**:

¹ Note: while most commentators read the expression positively, some read it negatively (i.e., he was not worthy but God had mercy on him) – see, e.g., Radak (ad loc.) who brings both ways.

רמב"ן בראשית פרשת נח פרק ו פסוק ט [הערות של מואיז]

איש צדיק תמים היה - יזכיר הכתוב **שהיה זכאי ושלים בצדקו**, להודיע שראוי להנצל מן המבול שאין לו עונש כלל, כי הוא **תמים בצדק**, ורבי אברהם אמר, צדיק במעשיו, תמים בלבו. [אבל לא שייך "לב" כי] כתיב (יחזקאל כח טו) **תמים אתה בדרכיך** [במעשים ולא ב"לב"]:

So it is **actions** that make up his righteousness. So much so that the Ramban was not willing to accept Ibn Ezra's interpretations that Noah's righteousness included both goodness of deed and goodness of heart. No, the term Tzadik tamim emphasizes only deeds (though we may speculate that such were prompted by a good heart).

Interestingly, the Midrash emphasizes that "righteous" (tzadik) implies the specific action of "mechalkel" taking care of the food and (more broadly) economic needs of others:

פסיקתא זוטרתא (לקח טוב) בראשית פרשת נח פרק ו פסוק ט

צדיק. שהיה **מכלכל החיות בתיבתו**, וכיוצא בו נאמר ביוסף [שהיה צדיק] (עמוס ב ו) [ולמה?: משום דכתיב ביה "**ויכלכל יוסף את אביו ואת אחיו**" (בראשית מז יב)]:

So, what I would like to propose to you is that Noah's righteousness – the very trait that got him and his family saved, the very essence of why he found favor in God's eyes, was TECHNOLOGY. Of course, he was a righteous person, but that is NOT why he earned the title "tzadik tamim", as we read in the Ramban's comments against the Ibn Ezra. It was, I suggest, Noah's actions to develop technology to improve the economic condition of humanity that gained him this coveted title.

To prove my thesis, we need look no further than the very verse describing Noah's naming:

בראשית פרק ה

(כט) וַיִּקְרָא אֶת שְׁמוֹ נֹחַ לֵאמֹר זֶה יִנְחַמֵּנוּ מִמַּעֲשֵׂינוּ וּמִעֲצָבוֹן יִדְּיֵנוּ מִן הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אָרְרָה יְקֹקֵק:

"And he called his name Noah, saying: "This same shall comfort us in our work and in the toil of our hands, which cometh from the ground which the LORD hath cursed."

But what exactly did Noah do to bring “comfort” from the “work” and “toil” of their hands? The Radak asks precisely this question and answers (in an expansion of Rashi’s comments based on the midrash Tanchuma 1:11):

רד"ק בראשית פרשת בראשית פרק ה פסוק כט

ומה היתה ההנחה והמנוחה שעשה נח בעולם? אמרו, כי עד שלא בא נח בעולם לא היה להם כלי מחרישה והיו יגעים בידיהם במר ופסל לחרוש ולזרוע, משבא נח שהיה איש האדמה וחשב בשכל להקל בעבודת האדמה, תקן כלי מחרישה וחרש עם השוורים והחמורים ולמדו בני העולם ממנו. הנה כי הוא היקל בעבודת האדמה וזהו הנחמה וההנחה, ... ומעצבון ידינו - ממה שהיינו עֲצֵבִים וְעַמְלִים בידינו:²

So Noah’s great contribution to humanity, the act for which he was named, was: the plow.

Technology!

It is with this that Noah undid the curse of Adam:

בראשית פרק ג

(יז) וּלְאָדָם אָמַר ... אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוּרָךְ בְּעִצְבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ:

And while we might conjecture that God would not be pleased with the undoing of the curse under which he had placed man, God is clearly *not* upset with Noah, as He chooses him to begin the world anew. This is the divine stamp of approval for technological development. Indeed, God doesn’t want us to suffer, to be burdened (itzavon), rather He *wants* us to undo the curse of Adam. He wants us to fix the world – with technology.

But what is even more fascinating (meratek) than the fact that the Torah here denotes this turning point in the history of man with the invention of the plow, is that the history of science supports this very claim!

The science historian (historion hamada), James Burke, explains that before the plow, people were hunter-gatherers (ציידיים-לקטים), they lived in small clans that could be

² Similarly Rashi (ad loc.). רש"י בראשית (ה:כט) זה ינחמנו - ינח ממנו את עצבון ידינו, עד שלא בא נח לא היה להם כלי מחרישה והוא הכין להם, והיתה הארץ מוציאה קוצים ודרדרים כשזורעים חטים, מקללתו של אדם הראשון, ובימי נח נחה, וזהו ינחמנו, ינח ממנו.

mobile to follow the animals and find new vegetation.³ But it was the plow that changed everything, as Burke explains:

This is the first great man-made trigger of change: the plow. Because with it, you know how much harvest you're going to get next year and because of that, you know you're gonna be here next year and because of that you can **plan** for the future and after a while when you can **produce surplus** food, then that's when things really start to move in the tiny **settlements**. With regular food supplies the **population explodes**. The village expands there are more **buildings** and they're bigger for bigger families and the more permanent you **domesticate animals** for their milk and their meat in their skin because they're not there to hunt anymore. And **basket weaving** and the **twisting of grass** to do it teaches you how to spin flax and that makes **linen**. But it's the grain that causes the fundamental change because with it you **bake the bread** that is the staple diet on which everybody lives. And you learn about **ovens** and about the effects of heat on mud and brick. But above all you have to have somewhere to **store** the grain surplus: in **pots**. But there's so much surplus by now. You need the pots to be made faster and you need them to last longer. So the **potter's wheel** (אובניים) happens. Then comes a problem of **who does it belong to** and the only answer to that is this: **Writing**. And the very first writing takes the form of a name and a symbol for what's inside this pot or a lot of pots or an entire village granary.⁴

And from here to the need to channel water, defend cities, metal work, etc. etc..

He also explains that if man were to ever destroy the world, halila, the survivors would have to first and foremost make a plow before they could do anything else to start to rebuild the world.⁵ Exactly as did Noah! And this, because the first order of business in

³ See <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-plowman-parshat-noah/>

⁴ Transcript: <https://www.yousubtitles.com/James-Burke-Connections-Ep-1-The-Trigger-Effect-id-2474792>

⁵ The only way you're going to survive is if you find the one thing you need to keep on providing the food you're going to have. And you don't need the mechanized version of that thing. You need the kind people haven't used in a hundred years. Ah, you need that kind of plow. It's taken a series of miracles just to get you this far and here you are with the biggest miracle of all a plow and animals to pull it so maybe after a

a society is food – we must “mechakel” ourselves.⁶ It is upon this that our entire economy starts.

It is because of this that God chose Noah – he had the ability to “mechakel” the world. It is because of this that he was called righteous (tzadik tamim). Because of his ability to rebuild civilization from scratch, his ability to design and develop meaningful technology, his ability to turn back the curse of Adam. Noah was Tzadik tamim because he was an engineer!

Now, for all the good that technology does for the world, it must be stated that “tikkun olam” – making the world the better place that it is to be is a two-pronged effort: one prong is the technology to remove us from our burdens, the other prong is the ethics to guide us to design, develop and deploy the technology for the good.

Interestingly, just as critical as the plow was to move civilization forward, R. J. Sacks explains that it was morality, in the form of common religious beliefs, that allowed that civilization to trust each other enough to work together as a cohesive society. “By establishing moral communities on a large scale through shared beliefs ... religion solved the problem of [how to] establish trust between strangers. Without this, it is doubtful that humanity would ever have left the hunter-gatherer stage.”⁷

So while we have made truly astounding strides in our efforts to develop technology, it is incumbent upon us to develop the morality that frames both our technologies and our societies.

Shabbat Shalom.

few days of fumbling around with the harnesses and the bits and pieces you managed to yoke up the oxen and plow the land and then and only then can you say that you have successfully escaped the wreckage of technological civilization and lived off the land.

⁶ As Abraham Maslow famously explained that food is the first basic need, “all [other needs to] be waved aside as fripperies which are useless since they fail to fill the stomach” (“A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review*, 50[4], 1943, pp.370–396).

⁷ Sacks, *Morality*, p. 291.