

Avraham and Noah: Two Models of Religious Devotion

A guest post from our chaver R. Shmuel Goldin

Why the comparison? Why are the rabbis intent on comparing Noah to Avraham?

This is not an exercise that we usually perform. We don't, for example, compare Moshe to Shmuel, Yosef to Eliahu or even Adam to Noah. We are generally content to allow the actions of each individual speak for themselves. Why the sudden change when it comes to Noah and Avraham?

Most obviously, we might suggest that the rabbis want to underscore the stark contrast between these biblical personalities when faced with the fate of "others."

Noah's silence prior to the impending flood is clearly light years away from Avraham's pleas for the citizens of Sodom and Amora. Similarly Noah's inaction could not be more different than Avraham's immediate response to the capture of his nephew, Lot.

I believe, however, that another force catalyzes the rabbinic comparison between Avraham and Noah. The rabbis want to emphasize a choice made that was not a foregone conclusion.

Avraham and Noah present two different religious models, two different ways to relate to Hashem.

Noah's greatness lay in acceptance and obedience. The Torah repeatedly testifies that Noah fulfilled Hashem's instructions to the letter, without argument or resistance.

In contrast, Avraham's greatness lay in engagement and struggle. Deeply connected to Hashem, he did not simply accept the presented reality. From the responses mentioned above to his continued confrontation with Hashem in the face of his and Sara's childlessness,

Avraham is far from passive. He is an active partner with Hashem in the quest for a better reality.

The choice between these two models is, as we said, is not a foregone conclusion.

A case could be that Hashem would prefer Noach's model of unquestioning obedience. By choosing Avraham over Noach, Hashem lays the groundwork for our ongoing relationship with the divine.... A relationship in which we are not passive participants, but active partners with heaven as we seek to better our world.