



“In His Generation”: Models of Relationship Between Individual and Society

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Parashat Noah invites us to reflect on the relationship between society and the individual. The introduction of its main character raises a central question: What is our role when we live within a corrupt society? How should we conduct ourselves when leaders are not guided by the values we hold dear, and when many individuals disagree with us about what is good, just, and right?

Our *parashah* calls us to consider the choices of the first individual who found himself in such a situation, offering a foundational examination of the relationship between the individual and society.

The Torah tells us that Noah was righteous and wholehearted in a generation that was neither:

בראשית ו:ה,ח,ט,יא,יב

⁵וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי רָבָה רָעַת הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וְכָל יֹצֵר מַחְשֵׁבֶת לִבּוֹ רָק רָע כָּל הַיּוֹם: ... וְנֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה
¹¹וַתִּשְׁחַת הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹקִים וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס: ... ¹²כִּי הִשְׁחִית
בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת הָאֱלֹקִים הַתְּהֵלֶךְ נֹחַ: ...



כָּל בֶּשֶׂר אֶת דִּרְכוֹ עַל הָאָרֶץ:

Bereishit 6:5,8,9,11,12

⁵God saw how great was human wickedness on earth—how every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time... ⁹Noah was a righteous and wholehearted man **in his generation**; Noah walked with God... ¹¹And the earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹²... for all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth.

Noah is described in relation to his contemporaries, *bedorotav* ("in his generation"). Through different interpretations of the word, I will offer a look into the characteristics of those relationships. Are they confrontational or based in dialogue characterized by rejection or connection? Is his conduct despite his generation, or in response to it? And what can we learn from this about the options available to us in our relationship with a society that seems to us corrupt, destructive, and decayed?

A. As one of his generation

Who is Noah, this lone figure standing in contrast to people of his time? One striking midrashic interpretation, reduces Noah's distinctiveness almost to nothing. The Babylonian Talmud states: "אַף עַל נַח נִחְתָּךְ גָּזַר דִּין - Even upon Noah was the decree of judgment passed" (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 108a). This *midrash* seems to suggest an interpretation of the word "in his generation" as meaning "**together** with/**similar** to/**among** his generation." The phrase claims Noah was like the fellows of his time and subject to their fate.

This interpretation carries two implications. First, since it suggests that Noah was no different than any other individual of his generation, it highlights that the question of how I, as a single individual, should conduct myself in relation to the society around me, is a fundamental one, not limited to leaders or exceptional figures alone. No human being can evade this question; it must be asked by all.



Second, according to the *midrash*, judgment was decreed upon Noah just as upon the rest of his generation—but even when fate seems imposed, the possibility of choice remains. When we live in an age of oppression and destruction, we may feel that our fate is determined by our environment, that we have no power to stop evil, that we are doomed to be part of a corrupt system. The *midrash* clarifies that neither helplessness nor lack of influence releases a person from the responsibility of choice. Even when we feel that reality is being imposed upon us and our fate seems sealed together with that of our generation, we must still examine our relationship with the society around us. **We have a choice, even if we feel that our freedom and capabilities are limited.**

So how does Noah—who is portrayed here as simply one among his fellows—choose to act?

B. Alone in his generation

A central voice of various commentators claims that Noah's righteousness was expressed in his behavior and intentions while living amidst an evil generation. In other words, the essence of Noah's behavior was that he acted differently. The Ramban,¹ for example, explains:

רמב"ן בראשית ו:ט

הוא איש צדיק, כי איננו איש חמס ומשחית דרכו כבני דורו החיבים... רק בשם לבדו הוא דבק תמיד

והולך בדרכו אשר בחר השם או אשר יורה אותו

Ramban on Bereishit 6:9

He was a righteous man, for he was not a man of violence nor did he corrupt his ways like the people of his generation who were guilty... but rather he cleaved to God alone always and walked in the way that God had chosen or would show him.

¹ R. Moshe ben Nahman or Nahmanides (Catalonia, c. 1194-1270).



The Ramban emphasizes that Noah's choice was twofold: he chose not to be like his generation, a righteous man in contrast to "his generation"; and he chose a particular path, adhering to a particular standard: the way of God.

The Ramban adds a poignant observation about Noah's existential experience. He understands the word "in his generation" as pointing to the essence of Noah's life experience:

וְהִנָּחֵן בְּעֵינַי לְפִי הַפֶּשֶׁט כִּי טַעַמּוֹ לֹמַר שֶׁהוּא לְבִדּוֹ הַצַּדִּיק בְּדוֹרוֹת הָהֶם, אֵין בְּדוֹרוֹתָיו צַדִּיק וְלֹא תַמִּים
זוּלָתוֹ ... וְאֵין צַדִּיק בְּאֶרֶץ בְּלִיתוֹ.

He alone was righteous in those generations; there was no righteous and wholehearted man in his generations besides him ... there was no righteous person on earth except him.

The Ramban focuses on Noah's experience and explains that when the societal norm is violence, corruption, and destruction, then it is lonely to do good.

C. Rebuking his generation

Another voice in the midrashic tradition imagines Noah moving among the people of his generation trying to influence his society to act with righteousness, honesty, and goodness. He attempts to speak to them in different ways: rebuking them in the hope that they will repent, speaking harsh words, threatening them. What all these voices share is the picture of Noah in dialogue with his contemporaries.

תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין קח.

דַּרְשׁ רַבִּי יוֹסִי דְמֵן קֶסֶרִי: ... הָיָה נֹחַ הַצַּדִּיק מוֹכִיחַ בָּהֶם וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶם: עֲשׂוּ תְשׁוּבָה, וְאִם לֹא הִקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא מְבִיא עֲלֵיכֶם אֶת הַמַּבּוּל.



Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 108a

R. Yose from Caesarea explained: ... Noah the righteous would rebuke them and say to them: "Repent, and if not, the Holy Blessed One will bring the flood upon you."²

R. Yose from Caesarea portrays Noah on a mission of persuasion: to lead his generation to change from what the Torah describes as evil, violent, and the corruption of the earth.

Perhaps R. Yose from Caesarea is not satisfied with the interpretive approach that sees Noah merely choosing to live an upright and life-affirming path for himself, nor with Noah's solitude in doing good. Perhaps he maintains that in order to be "a righteous, wholehearted man in his generation" more is required: an active stance toward the generation, an engagement with the society in which one lives, including the refusal to accept the evil that surrounds him and the need to actively reject, resist, and engage.

D. For future generations

Beyond doing good and acting upright on his own, and beyond his attempt to persuade the people of his generation to act righteously, Noah is engaged in another significant and central task: he built an ark. What is the essence of that act? Of course it shows obedience to God. But the act of building the ark is also an act of building a future. One might see this as giving up on the present—an acceptance of evil, moral decay, and destructiveness. I suggest interpreting it as reflecting an understanding that, despite the reality of a broken, ruined, violent, and wounded world, Noah adopts a forward facing attitude. He believes something will be left—and the world will require rebuilding. Noah exerts his efforts to lay the groundwork for that future restoration.

² See also Rava's even more emphatic version on 108b.



Noah, as the first human being who must decide the nature of the relationship between the individual and society, serves as a paradigm for the relationship between a person and the collective. Thus we are confronted with the question of how a person should act in a world which they perceive is filled with people doing evil, engaging in exploitation and destruction. We have seen a variety of answers, all based on interpretations of the phrase "in his generation."

First, even if individuals are "like any other," ordinary people—so to speak—they must still confront the conduct of society.

Second, the choice to act as one believes has existential implications and may lead to loneliness.

Third, the individual has to make the choice of whether to try to change the behavior of their contemporaries.

And finally, there exists the option to focus on the future—even if that means, to some degree, giving up on the present.

These different answers arise in particular times and circumstances as alternatives. Sometimes several of them can be chosen in parallel. They claim that even when facing a society whose trajectory is understood as destructive evil or corrosive moral decay, and even when we feel helpless, still, possibilities exist before us. As R. Tarfon said: "It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it" (Mishnah Avot 2:16).

