

This week's Parsha, Parshat Noach, contains the tale of the flood and Noach's salvation through the construction of the ark. The Hebrew word for ark, Teivah also has another definition, "word." The Gerrer Rebbe explains that the Teivah of Noach does not simply refer to the actual boat that Noach sailed to safety upon, rather his words, specifically those of Tefillah, prayer. Noach was not only commanded to physically build a Teivah, but also to engage in speaking the Teivah, the words of prayer. Although the Gerrer Rebbe's thoughts are really a beautiful metaphorical interpretation of the flood story, what is the underlying message of his explanation? Perhaps even more perplexing is his characterization of Noach; did the Rebbe mean to say that Noach only engaged in these spiritual pursuits during his days on the ark, but previously he did not engage in prayer? The opening verse in the Parsha already informs us that he was a righteous individual, certainly he must have spent considerable time immersed in the powerful and meaningful words of Tefillah, why then would the story indicate that only during the flood did he escape on the Teivah, the words of prayer?

The Zohar says that as great as Noach was, his greatest failure was that he did not pray for his generation. While it is entirely plausible that he felt that the sins of his generation were so heinous that they were beyond the realm of salvation, one can never give up on humanity and never underestimate the power of prayer. A similar thought is echoed in a Talmudic passage in Tractate Brachot. The Gemara there states that even if a sharp sword is literally placed on one's neck and he is facing certain death, he should not despair. Even against all odds, prayer has the transformative power to accomplish almost anything

Although Noach was righteous by the standards set by his society, he lost his voice and he was unwilling or unable to engage in any form of prayer on their behalf. His behavior stands in stark contrast to Abraham, his grandson. As soon as Abraham hears of G-D's plan to destroy the evil sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, immediately he negotiates, pleads, and contends with G-D. He recognizes that one can never give up on people and he immediately turns to a most sincere and intense form of prayer. Abraham realized what Noach did not, that prayer even at the last possible moment is if not the most powerful thing to do, is the only thing that one can do.

Noach's entrance to the Teivah is his opportunity to find his voice and to discover the power of prayer. Noach now begins a new chapter in his life, he dedicates his every waking moment to the care of G-D's creatures, as all the animals, birds and reptiles depend on him for food and shelter. Feeding and caring for whatever remains from the animal kingdom, awakens Noach's compassion and empathy for others. It is in these days that he rediscovers the Teivah, the words of prayer; he remembers that he can and must pray for the health and well-being of others.

The Gerrer Rebbe points out that even the measures of the Teivah allude to Noach discovering the power of his voice. The Torah records that G-D commanded Noach to make the ark 30 cubits high by 300 cubits long by 50 cubits wide. The Hebrew letters with the numerical equivalent of 30 x 300 x 50 are lamed, shin, and nun. Together these letters spell out the word lashon, tongue. The Teivah was Noach's opportunity to rediscover the power of lashon, the transformative nature of prayer and the incomparable power of the voice of those that care.

***Shabbat Shalom
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