

Parshat Noach 5776

When Hashem wanted to destroy the world with a flood but save Noach and his family, He commanded Noach to build an Ark which would serve as his haven during the storm. Rav Yoshiyahu Pinto asks an obvious question: Couldn't Hashem have saved Noach miraculously as He later saved Avraham Avinu and others? Why did Hashem command Noach to build an Ark? Rashi says that Hashem told Noach to build the Ark so that over the 120 years of its construction, the people would question Noach as to its purpose and would then hopefully do Teshuva averting the need for the flood. Rabbi Birnbaum states that where destruction was decreed upon Nineveh, Hashem sent the prophet Yonah to warn the city in the hope that they would repent. Indeed, they repented and the decree was annulled. Why did Hashem not just command Noach to announce the forthcoming flood? Rabbi Birnbaum contrasts the generation of the flood with the citizens of Nineveh. Although both were guilty of chamas, robbery and other sins, the generation of the flood was utterly corrupt- Vateeshocheis haaretz lifnei haElokim. When flaws are deeply engrained, such a person becomes impervious to the admonitions of others and unaffected by the outstanding examples of others. But when the character remains partially pure, such individuals are receptive to rebuke etc Nineveh's character, was not so fundamentally flawed but in Noach's generation, Hashem in His mercy still wanted to provide an opportunity for Teshuva. Perhaps only a physical manifestation of the impending danger would be the springboard for this and so Noach was given this command. Ramban states that there was no natural way the Ark could contain two of every animal, let alone enough food to last them all a full year. But in every miracle, Hashem wants man to do his part, and He will do that which is beyond man's capacity. In this way, the miraculous nature of the event is minimized. Why would Hashem want to minimize His miracles? Rabbi Scheinerman explains that by making the miracles appear to be somewhat natural, Hashem allows us to retain our belief in Him without destroying free choice. Just as the people could potentially attribute the salvation of Noach to a boat, so we are challenged in seeing everything that happens to us as either part of the natural cycle of cause and effect, or as the result of Hashem's constant guidance and protection.

Rabbi Pinto posits that if miracles are meant to appear somewhat natural, why do we have open miracles throughout the Torah (and Medrash)? Yet Hashem performed only a "hidden" miracle for Noach. The answer lies not so much in Hashem's actions, but in the actions of those who precipitated Hashem's responses. In those instances where the miracles are glaringly obvious as miracles, the people involved did more than just follow Hashem's command and refrain from sin, as did Noach. In each case, they went beyond the call of duty with mesiras nefesh, with extraordinary self sacrifice and

Hashem responded in kind. Avraham put his life on the line in a suicide mission to save his nephew Lot and Bnei Yisroel followed Hashem in complete faith into a wilderness where food and water would not be naturally available. Noach, on the other hand, did only what was required of him and no more, not even praying for those around him. Therefore, Hashem too responded with only the minimal, natural way of survival, with a "boat" to sail the waters. This idea is validated through a verse in Tehillim 121, "Hashem tzilcha al yad yeminecha - Hashem is your shade (your shadow) on your right hand." Just as a shadow responds directly in proportion to your actions, so does Hashem respond to us is proportion to our actions. Rabbi Yanky Tauber offers a beautiful insight into this concept based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. When we recite the Shema, after we say to love Hashem with all your heart (passions and desires) and with all your soul (even willing to give your life), we continue by saying, "And with all me'odecha." What else is there? Rabbi Tauber posits that the usual translation of wealth or might ignores the fact that wealth would be subsumed under your heart, things you want. The true translation of meod is "very" or "more so". In other words, we should strive to love Hashem with all our 'veryness' or with all our 'beyondness', that is, above and beyond our currently defined selves, to go beyond ourselves, beyond what we perceive as our limitations, and reach for a higher, better self. The very hebrew letters of MEOD are an anagram for ODOM, MAN, who with perseverance and self sacrifice can go far beyond (MEOD) his perceived capabilities. Thus our 'beyondness' is just a deeper dimension of our own selves previously obfuscated by our own self perceived limitations. The 'new you' is in fact the true you.

Rabbi Shmuelevitz says that when a person extends themselves beyond the norm, they have the power to infuse physical objects with additional and supernatural energy. Noach had to push himself beyond his natural endurance to continue building the Ark over 120 years of ridicule and derision so his mesiras nefesh infused the Ark with the supernatural ability to house many animals and store sufficient food. Had Noach pushed himself further and concerned himself with others then he would have been saved in a more supernatural way. Further, the chessed and cohesiveness which being in the ark demanded was a further merit for Noach and teaches us to look out for, daven and care for and unite with all our brothers and sisters as this merits the greatest force of Divine protection. Now that the Yomim Tovim are over, how will we go beyond ourselves? Will we go to a shiur when it's not convenient, say extra Tefillos or Tehillim for others, or take on an additional resolution to demonstrate our love and commitment to Hashem, His Torah and His people? (Based on part of a shiur by Rebbetzin Shira Smiles)