

## Parashat Noach

### The Human 'Group Animals'

#### You are Where You Live

Human beings are 'group animals;' we come in flocks. We may not even notice how much we are influenced by the people in our environment. When we lived in the US. I wore a wig and pointed shoes. When I settled in Bat Ayin, I dumped my wig into the Purim box, and exchanged my shoes for comfortable orthopedic sandals (*Naot*). My husband ditched his tie but not yet his suit except for on the holidays when he wears the beautiful gold and blue striped robe, I bought for him. Everyone transforms when moving to Bat Ayin. It is not only that we wear flowing colorful scarves and drink wheatgrass juice; it's the *Eretz Yisrael* Chassidic spirit that sweeps us away into a meditational world of *hitbodedut* (being alone with Hashem). Just 20 minutes' drive from the unconventional colorful Bat Ayin is the *chareidi* settlement of Beitar, filled with black and white suited men and stylish buttoned up ladies. Wonder how I would look and what kind of person I would have been if we lived in Beitar, or even Ramat Beit Shemesh?

Over the years, I have seen so many people change and conform to their environment, not just in the outer layer of their wrappings. I once had a wonderful student let's call her Lisa. She was completely new to Torah but so excited about learning to say *berachot*, dressing modestly, and keeping Shabbat. She really resonated with the Torah lifestyle and the teachings at our midrasha, but a special job offer in California tempted her to shorten her stay in Bat Ayin to less than three months. As she embarked to return to her previous environment, which was spiritual but not holy the Torah way, I tried everything I could to convince her to stay, but to no avail. I know the power of the environment, and that without a Torah community and mentors she would quickly become reabsorbed into her past lifestyle. Had she stayed for even just six months, she would have been a different person today. Most likely, she would have been happily married and a mother of several children, living on a farmland with a vegetable garden, chicken and even goats. Instead, she now lives with her boyfriend in an ashram, enjoying yoga and meditation in the Himalayan Mountains, practicing the spiritual teachings of Swami Sivananda. So is there a way to go against the grain and prevent absorbing the secular influence and culture of our environment?

#### Implementing the Proper Balance between Shielding and Exposure

Some people employ an extreme way of screening their children from secular culture. I just heard about a *ba'al teshuva* (returnee to Judaism) family here who do not allow their children to visit their parents in fear of their secular influence. Furthermore, they have strict conditions for their parents to visit them. They make their moms wear modest dresses and wigs, while their dads need to wear black hat and suit! I was amazed that their parents actually comply. While I feel that these extreme requirements go against the mitzvah to honor our parents, on the other hand sometimes we may be sacrificing our kids for the sake of honoring our parents, when we bring them to their environment for super-fun Disney world vacations. Rav Daniel Stavsky once told my husband and me, that it is best if our parents could visit with our children on our turf. Sometimes *ba'alei teshuva* parents are overwhelmed by life, they turn every penny,

and have little resources to offer their kids, while their secular grandparents give them the greatest fun secular exposure. Is it any wonder that these children often gravitate towards the secular values of their grandparents, most of whom even have a hidden agenda to provide them with exposure. It is a miracle if these children remain devoted to their parents' Torah values. On the other hand, sometimes children of *ba'alei teshuva* who are raised too protected, prohibited from playing computer or read anything vaguely secular etc. come to loathe the Torah world. Their strict upbringing backlashes and they crave to be part of the world from which they so carefully had been screened. Some of these children grow up to become the teenagers you see Friday night, gathering outside of the synagogue, boys with long hair and earrings with girls in short skirts and tank tops. Although children are like tender plants that respond to whatever soil, compost and watering you give them, I don't believe in screening them completely from the world at large, especially not if you are a *ba'alat teshuva*, and secularism is part of your background and family constellation. Yet, too permissive an upbringing without Torah values and proper boundaries is no less damaging. It is important to protect children from a spiritual toxic environment including TV shows that teach foul language, gluttony and immodesty. Most important is to give our children and grandchildren lots of fun Torah experiences. We need to find the right balance for each child, as King Solomon teaches, "Educate a child according to his way, then even when he is old, he will not depart from it" (*Mishley 22:6*).

### Rising Above the Environment

Noach was one of the few outstanding people who was able to rise above his environment.

**ספר בראשית פרק ו פסוק ט**

אלה תולדות נח נח איש צדיק תמים ה'ה בְּדֹרֹתָיו אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים הִתְהַלֵּךְ נח:

"These are the generations of Noach. Noach was a righteous and wholehearted person in his generations. Noach walked with G-d" (*Bereishit 6:9*).

Rashi explains that the word *בְּדֹרֹתָיו/b'dorotav* – "in his generations," can be understood either to his detriment or as a praise. Noach's righteousness was possibly only relative to the wicked people in his generation, who robbed and stole from one from one another. They were interested only in their own personal pleasures and comforts. On the other hand, "in his generations," could be a praise for Noach, indicating that in spite of the corruption of his generations, Noach was able to rise above his environment. (Rashi, *Bereishit 6:9*). It is one of the greatest challenges not to be influenced by our environment. Therefore, in the entire ten generations between Adam and Noach, when the spiritual atmosphere was downhill, there were hardly any righteous people, who withstood the influence of their surroundings. It is not clear how Noach managed to remain righteous in such a corrupt environment. Although he wasn't able to bring people of his generation close to Hashem like Avraham, that doesn't mean he didn't try. Rashi explains that there were numerous ways by which G-d could have saved Noach, why then did He burden him with the construction of the Ark? So that the men of the generation of the Flood might see him employed on it for 120 years, and ask him, "What do you need this for?" Noach then warned them, "The Almighty is about to bring a flood upon the world. If you mend your ways you can be saved from perishing in the flood" (Based on Rashi, *Bereishit 6:14*).

### **Influencing Others Positively Saves us from Negative Influence**

While the environment of Noach's generation was extreme in its corruption, we may fall prey to the influence of various degrees of devotion to Hashem prevailing in different environments. We need to learn from Noach when moving to a new environment, even if it is only a little less *Torahdik*. My husband and I had to move temporarily from our protected Jerusalem setting to live outside of Israel while he fulfilled his obligation to the US government and paid back his medical student loans by working in a physician shortage area. We were uprooted from our Yeshivish community and placed in a modern environment where I became one of the only 30 married women who covered their hair within a population of 7000 Jews. While the community was lovely, caring and kind in so many ways, and we made many wonderful friends, we did come from a community centering around Torah and Divine Service, and landed straight into a community that revered secular education. What kept us from sliding down into the more secular lifestyle where most people lived as Jews only on Shabbat? We learned a principle from the basic rule of koshering chicken through removing its blood via salting. Although generally, the chicken is placed on a special slanted board and the poultry is opened and salted inside and out, you may have noticed that some kosher chickens remain whole and unopened. This implies that when they were being salted, the blood from the upper part of the chicken would be dripping down into the lower part, and seemingly, the blood would be reabsorbed into this part of the chicken. However, there is a halachic rule that as long as the blood is still being drained from the chicken it will not absorb any new blood (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 70*). Likewise, if you have to be in an environment, which may not measure up to your standard of Torah lifestyle, the way to protect yourself from being influenced is by influencing others. This is the main principle of the spiritual survival of all the Chabad *sheluchim*, (emissaries) and this is my personal experience while living in a more secular environment. I kept my spiritual sanity by giving classes and organizing Rosh Chodesh gatherings for women. You don't have to be a teacher to find alternative ways of bringing people closer to Hashem. Even if you don't succeed, just the effort has a protective effect, as in the case of Noach!