

*"And Noah, a man of the earth, commenced to plant a vineyard."* (Bereshis 9:20). As we know, this agricultural undertaking resulted in the ruination of Noah and much of his offspring.

Why did Noah become deeply intoxicated? One may opine that Noah's actions were a response to the despair which he must have felt at seeing his entire world destroyed. It was a case of post-traumatic stress syndrome after experiencing extreme calamity and catastrophe and witnessing massive annihilation.

As logical as it may sound, the above explanation does not seem to be what Chazal had in mind. Rashi (on Bereshis 9:20) quotes Midrash Rabbah which explains that Noah brought grape vines into the Taivah (Ark) as part of the cargo. This would imply that Noah did not suddenly engage in heavy drinking as a result of depression; rather, he planned all along to produce wine and (possibly) consume it liberally.

It may be suggested that Noah's downfall was rooted in his core religious commitment, which itself is the subject of dispute and question. We know that Noah was able to valiantly defy society's norms when it came to his personal lifestyle prior to the Mabul (Flood). Noah also built the Taivah in the presence of his opponents and was unscathed and uninfluenced by their castigation. He was a pioneer, and he did that which he knew was right.

However, after the Mabul, things changed. No longer was Noah the lone, brave tzaddik in the midst of sinners. He was never again to be unique and able to display his courage for Hashem's laws. At this point, Noah was disheartened, as the ability to be successful against the negative spiritual challenges of society was forever gone. Rather, he and his small (then seemingly righteous) family were to carry on, unfettered by opponents and a battle to overcome the outer culture's negative influences. Noah was thus despondent, as he needed to be challenged to be a tzaddik in the midst of sinners. This was his lifeblood, his adrenalin.

As the Mabul was about to commence, Noah became acutely aware that his unique role in society would shortly thereafter be history and that his drive would dramatically dissipate; he would no longer be the brave tzaddik challenged by a corrupt society. With this mindset, Noah included grapevines in the Taivah's baggage, in preparation for a mundane, earthly existence, lacking full motivation or total spiritual ambition.

This is why Noah is contrasted by Chazal with Avrohom Avinu. Avrohom was committed to Hashem at all times and in all circumstances. Thus, the phrase that Noah "walked with Hashem" differs from the description of Avrohom walking "before" Hashem; Chazal (our Sages) take this to imply that Noah needed assistance to remain righteous, while Avrohom could sustain his level of piety on his own. (Rashi on Bereshis 6:9, from Midrash Rabbah) What Chazal may have intended to convey is that Avrohom was internally righteous under all circumstances, whereas Noah's observance was situational.

We are sometimes in scenarios in which we function as the tzaddikim of the group. This is easy for some people, as they enjoy the challenge and they operate at maximal levels under such circumstances. However, most of us are part of a religious Jewish society in which we are all generally similar. Such homogeneity can breed complacency. We learn from the story of Noach that it is precisely in these cases that we need to strive for greater heights in Avodas (Service of) Hashem.

Precise observance of mitzvos with greater zeal, as well as setting aside significant time to immerse ourselves in Torah learning in a serious environment, are goals and priorities which must be strengthened regularly, regardless of the fact that we may not be challenged by our surroundings as we pursue these holy endeavors.

We are the B'nei Avrohom. Let's walk before Hashem.