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*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

Parashat Noach

"This is the lineage of Noah, Noah, a righteous man, he was perfect in his generation. Noah walked with God. (Gen 6:9, Trans. my own)." The Bible describes Noah as "perfect in his generation." The Biblical commentator Rashi (based on Babylonian Talmud 108a) reports that these words could be taken either as high praise for Noah, or as a limitation of Noah's praise. As we are told, Noah's generation was not a good generation. The verse says "the earth was filled with lawlessness" (Gen. 6:11, trans. JPS). So, when we are told Noah was "perfect in his generation," these words could be further praise of Noah, saying that since Noah was perfect in his generation, had Noah existed in any other generation, he would have been an even greater *tsadik* (righteous person). On the other hand, these words could be read as a limitation of Noah's praise - meaning that although he was perfect for his generation, had Noah lived in another age, say the generation of Abraham, he would not have amounted to much of anything.

What does the Torah mean when it says that Noah was perfect in his generation? Is the mention of Noah's generation a limitation of Noah's greatness, or an amplification? The text, as we often like to say, lends itself to multiple interpretations. In turn, these interpretations teach us two different, but related lessons. Noah lived in a generation of evil. Noah was able to avoid the pitfalls of the behavior around him. Noah saw a world of immorality around him, a world of violence, robbery, and all forms of evil. Noah could have succumbed. Instead, he became a true *tsadik*, and the savior of the world and humanity. And it is the fact that Noah excelled despite the obstacles that earns him the praise of being "a perfect righteous person." If "perfect in his generation" means that Noah would have been a better person in another generation, then the fact that Noah is called "perfect" reminds us that all we can ever ask of ourselves is to be as good as we can be, given our own situation. If, on the other hand, "perfect in his generation" means that Noah, in that age of evil, rose above it all, to achieve absolute perfection, we are taught to not let society (or anything else, for that matter) become too quick an excuse for our own shortcomings.

What are the things that we use as an excuse to limit our own achievement? Are we too busy? Too old? Too young? Not educated enough? Not rich enough? Certainly, we all have our limits. But we also have untold potential. This is the wisdom of that old TV commercial for the US Army: "Be all that you can be." There, the Army is saying it straight out: When you come to the Army, we don't ask you to be General McArthur. It doesn't matter if you end up with stars on your sleeves. Just be all that you can be. There may be things that prevent us from doing everything we would like to do. But no power on heaven or earth can prevent us from being all that we can be. May we all follow the path of Noah by demanding of ourselves that we achieve all of which we are capable.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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