Noach: why did he not protest?

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Many cannot understand the statement in this week's sidrah, *Vayar Elokim et ha'aretz v'hinnei nishchatah,* "And God saw that, behold, the earth had become degenerate"—*Kiy hishchit kol basar et darko al ha'aretz,* "For *all flesh* had corrupted its way on the earth." They are perplexed as to how that situation arose, for surely there must have been some righteous people! And, if so, how was it that that righteous man, Noach, did not protest to God against their destruction, as Abraham had done for the righteous of Sodom and Gomorrah, and as Moses had done for the less-than-righteous Israelites.

Our view is that he did not protest *to God* because, by reason of circumstances, protest was never in his nature, as he had never protested to *man*!

Think. Is it comprehensible that a 'perfectly righteous man' should not have been revolted by his society's violence and immorality, and that he should not have publicly – or even privately – campaigned to change the ways of his compatriots and civilise their nature? The Torah has a deafening silence on that score. Indeed, God *says Kiy otkha ra'iytiy tzaddik lefanai bador ha-zeh*, "For I have seen you, the sole righteous man *before Me* in this generation" (7:1).

Noach confined his righteousness to God; he did not seek to share it and teach it to man; he did not confront the earthly leaders, judges, and men of influence, to cry out in protest

against the distortion of justice and the proliferation of immorality and violence. He did not, as it were, stand on a soap box and preach righteousness like Abraham, ten generations later— whose piety and spiritual networking convinced both the Philistine king and its military leadership that God worked through him (see Gen. 21:22), as well as Ephron the Hittite, who dubbed him 'a prince of God' (23:6) — and like the later prophets of Israel. This truly begs the question, why?

We can only conclude that the voice of protest, in those areas that constituted the inhabited world, had been well and truly stifled, and that most were ruled by tyrants who ruled over vast geographical areas and who brooked no opposition and executed any who had the temerity to oppose them. Such a situation is explicitly referred to in Gen. 10:8-12:

> Cush also begat Nimrod, who was the first man of might on earth. He was a mighty hunter by the grace of the Lord…The mainstays of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Accad and Calneh in the land of Shinar. From that land Ashur (Assyria) went forth and built Nineveh, Rechovot-ir, Calach and Resen between Nineveh and Calach, that is the great city.

Nimrod is described here as 'the first emperor, uniting different parts of Mesopotamia under his rule' (*The Jewish Study Bible*, Jewish Publication Society, Oxford 2004, p.28) And that would explain why the timid Noach never found his voice, whether in protest at *man's* evil or in protest at *God's* apparently unjust decision. This may also explain why God did not instruct Noach to endanger himself by becoming a martyr to the cause, and why He could not find any other 'righteous men' bold enough to challenge the existing order.

I support my interpretation with a verse from the end of today's sidrah, relating to the famous episode of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1). The Torah states there, *Vayehi kol ha'aretz safah echat— "And everyone on earth had the same language"— **ud'varim achadim**, "*and the same words." This (Jewish Publication Society) translation— "and the same words"— is problematic in that it represents tautology, an unnecessary repetition of the identical idea. Of course, if they spoke 'the same language' they also spoke 'the same words!'

The interpretation of the popular commentator, R. Meir Leibush Malbim (1809-1879), namely, "they had but a small vocabulary," is also unconvincing, given that the text is referring to a people that had already pioneered the skills of agriculture, farming, hunting, building, boat-making, garment making, the designing of musical instruments (Gen. 4:21); the forging of cutting instruments of brass and iron (v. 22)– all referred to up to this point. They must surely have coined vocabulary for all the activities associated with those skills. Indeed, if we go back to Lemech's poem in last week's sidra (vv. 23-24), it is both lyrically and dramatically expressive.

No. *Devarim achadim*, to my mind, is to be understood in the sinister sense of a people who were brow-beaten into submission to the will of a violent and terrifying leadership, to the extent that the citizenry was frightened to speak in public more than *devarim achadim*, "***a few*** words," in case they were overheard, reported, and charged with sedition, plotting against the state. And the Tower of Babel that they built was probably to facilitate that police state and enable them to further control the movement of the

people below.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Noach could never find his voice of protest, either against his fellow citizens or against the evil administration that ruled. Or, indeed, against God for destroying the righteous with the wicked!

The voice of protest is one of the most precious weapons in the moral armoury of man; and the founder of the Jewish faith was also the trail-blazer in the fearless expression of moral indignation.

There are countless countries today that are ruled by dictators who restrict their countrymen to *devarim achadim*, to having to measure and account for their every word, suppress their protests, and curb their national aspirations. One of the most precious values of democracy is the freedom it gives to individuals to express their opposition to aspects of government and life that they regard as misguided, immoral, or injurious to the general well-being of society. When the voice of protest is muzzled, human dignity is demeaned, fear and suspicion abounds and the cohesion of a society disintegrates.

There are some worrying signs that we, in this country, in Europe, and even in the USA, are also beginning to have our freedom of expression curbed by the rule of political correctness. Thus, religious leaders and others may not speak out against moral behaviour, relationships and lifestyles that are anathema to their beliefs. Jewish students on campus find their voices drowned out—and are prevented from inviting pro-Israel speakers to buttress its case. They feel threatened when they seek to defend Israel and

praise aspects of life there, such as that it is the sole democracy in the Middle East, the one country where people, and especially women, are treated as equals and are valued and respected, the one place where human life is paramount, where advanced medical care is made available to Jew and Arab alike, where modern values, freedom of religion and unfettered cultural and educational expression, is not just allowed, but taken for granted.

In Britain—the seat of parliamentary democracy—harmless verbal support of a cause is frequently suppressed because it is perceived as insulting to the sensibilities of another minority. Our community knows what it means to be restricted to *devarim achadim*!

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey