

Lifeboat

Parashat Noah: [Genesis 6:9-11:32](#)

Haftarah: [Isaiah 66:1-24](#)

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The *minyan* was two short; only eight, and none terribly practiced in leading the service, but at least they were dutifully present. Both the Rabbi and the Hazen were out of town. After all, the *Hagim* were over, so the professionally pious were on a break. Just as the sun was setting, Nachum walks into the *shul* hand in hand with a chimpanzee.

“Can we count a chimp in the *minyan*,” someone joked.

“Only if he can be the *Shaliach Tzibur*,” someone added.

“Oh, he can do it,” Nachum said, “but please don’t ask him.”

“Are you saying your chimp can *daven*?”

“Yes, but please don’t ask him,” Nachum said again.

Well, the sun was setting and the early eight were curious, so the chimp was led up to the *bima*. Sure enough, the chimp klopfs on the shtender *bam bam*. “Rabosai! Mincha!” he says, and then he began the Ashrei. The *minyan* knew their part and responded. Nachum’s chimp masterfully led *mincha*, gave a little *drash*, and when invited, continued right into *maariv*.

“*Hazak u’baruch* Chimp!”

“Nachum, that was amazing. Where on earth did you find such a chimp? More importantly, with such an astonishing talent, why didn’t you want him to be *Shaliach Tzibur*?”

“Because,” Nachum answered, “he always uses the wrong *nusach*.”

“*Noah ish Tzadik, tamim haya b’dorotav* - Noah was a *tzadik*, blameless in his generation.” (Gen. 6:9). The import of the verse turns on your decision of what to focus on, ‘*tzadik*’ or ‘*b’dorotav*’. Resh Lakish focuses on ‘*tzadik*’.

“Noah was amazing! You know how hard it is to be a *tzadik* in a generation like that?! It takes *extra tzidkut*.”

Rabban Yochanan gets stuck on 'b'dorotav'. He takes a position much like Nachum the owner of that extraordinary chimpanzee, "Yeah, but if you compare Noah to another generation, he really doesn't measure up as a *tzadik*" (Sanhedrin 108a).

The question really shouldn't be "was Noah a *tzadik*, not so much of a *tzadik*, or kind-of a *tzadik*?" That is *narishkeit*. After all, the question is answered for us by none other than Solomon. "*Ki adam ein tzadik ba'aretz, asher yaseh tov v'lo ichteh* -- For there is no *tzadik* on earth that does only the good and never sins (Ecc. 7:20). None wiser. A better question to ask is, "Do you look around hoping to find *tzadikim*?" It's a question of hopefulness, of outlook. Avraham held out hope that even in the most unlikely place one might find a *tzadik*. Regarding Sodom, he argues with God, "*Ha'af tispeh tzadik im rasha* -- Will You sweep away a *tzadik* with the wicked?!" (Gen. 18:23). Mind you Avraham was talking about Sodom!

The *Tzadik* of Sodom, it was said, would go around telling everyone to do *teshuvah*, to repent, but the people just laughed at him. He did this for years and years, but they never changed their ways; they only laughed at his plea.

"Why do you bother asking us to change? We are who we are."

"At first," the *Tzadik* of Sodom said, "I wanted to change you. Now I do and say what I always have so that you will not change me."

I prefer Resh Lakish's perspective on Noah; that he was a super *Tzadik* on the level of the *Tzadik* of Sodom. Every time I see a man or woman in a Sisyphean predicament, who, nonetheless, dares to make the tiniest bit of difference, I am in awe. These *tzadikim* are fighting for women's rights in the Congo, they are working with gangs in our own backyards. These *tzadikim* live with and care for the chronically poor and the mentally ill, and they do it everyday. *What difference can I make?* There are *tzadikim* who care for the least among us, and when I see the work that they do, the work I'm too overwhelmed to do myself, like a hassid before the Holy Baal Shem Tov, I am in awe. I never wonder about the ways in which they might be less than extraordinary. Before me is a person who has lighted a tiny candle of hope. Why would I want to extinguish it?

I imagine Noah taking advantage of every single day of the one hundred and twenty years it took him to build the ark. "The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness" (Gen. 6:11). They were a rough hundred and twenty years.

"Noah, why are you building a giant floating zoo?"

"I'm building an ark so that you will come and ask me why I'm building an ark. Then I can tell you that you've got to make a change in how you behave."

“How long will it take to build it?”

“You’ve been given a lifetime, one hundred and twenty years, to finally get it right. I’ll be here every day trying to help you get it right.”