

Zachary Karson

D'var Torah

NOACH

You probably know about Noah and the ark and how important a story it is. In fact, similar flood stories are significant for many cultures. What many people may not know is why the *man* Noah is so important in our Torah.

Everyone is unique, whether it's in their physical appearance, their personality, or their belief systems. However, at the time of the flood, Noah was distinctive from every other person on earth in a very special way. Noah lived his life by adhering to the core values of morality, decency and justice. During a time when immorality was pervasive, Noah was the *only* righteous man on earth.

Noah was exceptional because he was able to maintain his beliefs even though they completely isolated him from the society he lived in. People like Noah have taken on different roles in history, people such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela of South Africa, and Susan B. Anthony, a very courageous leader in the fight for women's rights. These people, like Noah, stood up for something they believed in regardless of what others thought and despite the risks and dangers involved.

These same scenarios go on right now in all of our lives. I see issues like this with my friends, where one of us may stick to an unpopular view even though they may get laughed at or teased. It takes a lot of confidence and determination to stand up for your beliefs in these situations, as well as a strong sense of right and wrong.

Noah was the only person of his era to realize that, by following the values of civility and justice, he would ultimately live a more fulfilling life. This righteous life is not easy because it means putting other people's needs before your own and not living for instant gratification. Noah chose to live with the morals, values, and spirit of God.

The bible tells us that all of the people on the planet at that time were unprincipled and pursued the immediate satisfaction of their desires. They stole from and cheated each other and acted selfishly and immorally. Noah was the only one with the depth and understanding to see that performing acts of *g'milut chasidim* – acts of loving kindness – made people happier about whom they were, which was important to Noah and also to God.

Noah's strength was his conscience – the innate sense of right and wrong that we feel in our soul, in our spirit, and that we find in God. It was this quality that led God to choose Noah to build the ark.

Noah's morality saved his life and the rest of humanity as well. It is incredible how one man's actions can have such a huge effect on the course of mankind. I know it's been said before, but it's always important to remember: One person *can* make a difference.

This one person doesn't have to be extremely smart or talented to change the world. If someone acts respectfully and kindly to another person, this other person will be motivated to act in a similar manner. Then, this cycle will repeat itself and a chain reaction will start.

In the words of Pirkei Avot, *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, meaning one mitzvah leads to another. So can a 13 year old like me make a difference? The answer is "yes." Studying about Noah, and volunteering with my bar mitzvah class at a shelter for battered women and children, has inspired me to find other ways to contribute to this positive cycle.

After the flood subsided there was no one on the land but the people from the ark, and it was Noah's responsibility to repopulate the earth, a very formidable task. Following the flood, there was no spirit, no energy and no life on the planet. Everything had to be restored. Noah had to rebuild the earth.

In a way, this part of the Torah reminds me of September 11th, when a big part of downtown Manhattan was destroyed and my vibrant neighborhood of Tribeca was suddenly consumed by trauma and loss. We, as New Yorkers, had to restore the city, which we are still in the process of doing. The process of rebuilding after an attack like 9/11 is so crucial because it revives the spirits of the survivors and proves that hard work, faith, community and determination can overcome evil.

The flood was not just a destructive act by a vengeful God -- it was also an act of cleansing. Water has always been a sign of purification in Judaism. All the bad was washed away and the good was kept. However, even though the flood was a symbol of purification, it was also horribly damaging. This demonstrates that something good can become terrible if used in excess.

Water is not an evil thing. It is, in fact, one of the greatest blessings, the very source of life itself, something that people pray for regularly in many cultures. When delivered in excess though, water can be the greatest plague.

It was fitting that God chose a flood because the people in Noah's generation sinned by doing things in great excess. They did things like drink too much wine, which when done in moderation, can be very holy (and enjoyable) but when abused can lead to destruction. Therefore, God punished the sinners in a way that was "measure for measure".

Each person has a responsibility to his or her community and to the world at large to behave decently, respect others and stand up for what he or she thinks is right – even when it is difficult. God, with the help of Noah, restored the earth after the flood. By fulfilling God's mitzvot and our human responsibilities, we do our part to preserve the planet.

God made a covenant with Noah and the human race that he will never again wipe out the earth's living beings to purify the planet. Therefore, it is up to us to take care of things, which we're not doing a very good job of right now. We must improve our way of life and create a world that is worth preserving.