

Saving The World

by Rabbi Reuven Mann

There are many compelling reasons why one should repent at this time. The Rambam explains that we can abandon sin and embark on the righteous path at *any* time. The mitzvah of Teshuva is not time bound but the question arises, are there occasions that are more propitious for this activity.

The Rambam states in Laws of Teshuva (2:7) “Yom Kippur is the time of Teshuva for all, the individual and the many, and it is the culmination of pardon and forgiveness: therefore everyone is obligated to repent and confess on Yom Kippur.”

This means that there is a dimension of “contemplating the appropriate moment” in repentance. One should consider the possibility of eliciting a favorable response. Hashem has designated this season as the one in which mankind should mend its ways. It is therefore most appropriate for all of us to respond with serious introspection at this moment.

There is another factor which can motivate someone to Teshuva. Specifically a person with a “heroic” frame of mind who wants to “make a difference”. How so?

One of the least appreciated Biblical figures is Noach. Although the Torah attests that he was a “righteous man” it modifies this with a single word, *bedorotav*, “in his generations”. This has had a negative impact on the reputation of Noach.

The Rabbis, who scrutinized and found meaning in the Torah’s every nuance took this to be limiting the extent of Noach’s greatness. They said, “In *his* generation but not in that of Avraham.” We thus see that there are different degrees of righteousness.

In what sense was Avraham greater than Noach? The standard answer is that Noach lived in a time of universal moral corruption. He mustered the strength to resist the tide and keep himself and his family on the right path but he was unable to save anyone else.

Avraham reached the level where he could mingle with people and instruct them in the exalted monotheistic religion by which he lived. He won over many adherents who lived by and perpetuated the Abrahamic way of life.

Thus Avraham occupies a higher rung than Noach. Not only was he uncorrupted by the culture of his time but he strove to transform it for the good. Noach however was unable to fight against the immorality of his contemporaries and was therefore inferior to Avraham.

In spite of the fact that Noach did not measure up to the lofty heights of Avraham he has a singular achievement which no human has duplicated; he saved the world. The Torah doesn’t mince words: “And Hashem said, ‘I will blot out man whom I created from the face of the earth—from man to animal, to creeping things, and to birds of the sky; for I have reconsidered My having made them. But Noach found grace in the eyes of Hashem.’”

What would have happened if there had not been a Noach or if he too had succumbed to evil? The plain and inevitable inference to be drawn is that the *entire* world would have been destroyed. So it can safely be said that Noach saved the world.

Has such an amazing deed ever been repeated? Can ordinary individuals duplicate that heroism? The Rambam states that Hashem's judgement extends to each individual and to the various countries that inhabit the world. That, however, is not where the matter ends for as he says, "And so too, the entire world: If their sins are greater than their merits-they are immediately destroyed."

It seems that Rambam does not rule out the possibility of a Divine decree of destruction against the world. Just as Hashem brought the great deluge He can obliterate the earth again. But this is problematic. For we read that after the Flood,

"Hashem said in His heart, 'I will not continue to curse again the ground because of man, since the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again continue to smite every living being, as I have done. Continuously, all the days of the earth, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'"

This declaration would seem to rule out the Rambam's contention that the very existence of mankind could be terminated because of extreme sinfulness.

I believe that Rambam did not interpret Hashem's words as constituting a guarantee of the world's survival. As long as man possesses free will he can behave in an egregious and self-destructive manner.

Perhaps Hashem means that after the Flood He took certain measures which had the effect of weakening man and making him less likely to glorify himself to the point where he disregarded all restraint. From here on, man would not be the supremely powerful being immune to illness and with a life span of almost a thousand years that he had been prior to the Flood. It would be unlikely then that man would attain the extreme hubris which necessitated his destruction. But it *could* happen. So Hashem continues to bring all of Mankind before Him for judgement.

What significance does this universal reckoning have on the individual Jew? The Rambam says,

"Therefore a person must view himself all year long as though he was half innocent and half guilty and so too the world. Thus if he performed one sin he tilted himself and the entire world to the side of guilt and caused destruction for himself. And, if he did one mitzvah he tilted himself and the world to the side of merit and brought about for himself and them rescue and salvation."

Is this just an abstract understanding or is a matter which should have a practical impact? "Because of this", says the Rambam, "the whole House of Israel has the custom of increasing charity and good deeds and to perform Mitzvot from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. And they all have the custom to arise while it is still night on these ten days to pray in the Synagogues with words of petition and contrition until daybreak."

The Jew cannot be concerned only for himself and his fellow Jews. He must develop a sensitivity to the needs of the entire world. He must increase his good deeds in anticipation of Hashem's great reckoning. His objective is to do all he can to stack the deck with righteousness in order to obtain a favorable judgement. For every one of us, big or small, woman or man, black or white can duplicate the accomplishment of Noach. He can save the world.

Shabbat Shalom v' G'mar Chatima tova.