



Likkutei Sichos

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The Architect behind the Ark

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1.

A LENGTHY PROJECT

Regarding the length of time that it took to construct the ark, the *Midrash* says,¹ “Noach worked on it for one hundred and twenty years.” Rashi quotes this in his Torah commentary.²

We need to clarify: How could Noach have prolonged fulfilling Hashem’s commandment,³ “Make yourself an ark of gopher wood...”? He should have constructed the ark with alacrity. [This is especially true in light of the ark’s purpose: (Noah’s salvation, and) the preservation of the entire earth!] —

Rashi ignores this question entirely!

We cannot suggest that Noach was at fault in this respect, for the verse testifies to Noach’s righteousness, “a righteous man, perfect...”⁴ Even according to the opinion⁵ that Noach was only righteous relative to his generation, the verse concludes and emphasizes that regarding the construction of the ark, “Noach did according to **everything** that Hashem commanded him, so he did.”⁶ This demonstrates that Noach fulfilled **this** commandment **perfectly** in all aspects.

We also cannot suggest: Hashem had promised⁷ that He would suppress His anger, affording the people a reprieve of 120 years during which they could repent. Noach, therefore, {reasoned that he} didn’t have to rush to construct the ark; rather, he spent this time trying to inspire the people to repent. [Had they repented, the flood would have been averted⁸ and the construction of the ark would have been unnecessary.]

¹ *Lekach Tov*, the beg. of *parshas Noach*, par. beg. “*tamim...*”

² *Bereishis* 6:14.

³ *Bereishis* 6:14.

⁴ {*Bereishis* 6:9.}

⁵ *Sanhedrin* 108a; Rashi’s commentary on *Bereishis* 6:9.

⁶ *Bereishis* 6:22.

⁷ *Bereishis* 6:3.

⁸ Rashi, *Bereishis* 7:12.

Because:

a) When Hashem commanded Noach, “make yourself...” no timeframe was given for completing its construction. Noach should have assumed that its construction was to be completed without delay. Since (as mentioned above) Noach fulfilled this commandment perfectly, it is unreasonable to suggest that he **postponed** its construction (even for the purpose of urging the people to repent).

b) The above explanation only justifies postponing the ark’s construction until the end of the 120 years. (Meanwhile, Noach could have devoted himself to inspiring his people to repent.) However, the question remains: Why, then, did Noach work on constructing the ark for **the entire 120-year period**?

2.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CONSTRUCTION

Seemingly, a simple resolution: Rashi⁹ himself (and also the Midrash)¹⁰ explains the reason why Hashem commanded Noach to construct the ark — although “Many ways to bring relief and rescue are available to Hashem. Why, then, did He burden Noach to construct the ark?” — “In order that the people of the Generation of the Flood should see him busying himself with it for 120 years and inquire, “For what do you need this?” And he would reply, “The Holy One is destined to bring a flood upon the world.’ Perhaps they would repent.”

Accordingly, constructing the ark and inspiring the people to repent are not two independent ideas, but rather, they are one and the same: The construction itself was a means to motivate them to repent.

⁹ *Bereishis* 6:14.

¹⁰ *Aggadas Bereishis*, ch.1:2; *Tanchuma*, Buber ed., *parshas Bereishis*, sec. 37.

Therefore, we understand that since this was the rationale for Hashem's command to "make yourself an ark...", Noach did not prolong construction of the ark due to indolence in fulfilling Hashem's command. On the contrary, prolonging the ark's construction was the optimum way of fulfilling Hashem's command (since the purpose of the construction was "in order that the people... should see him... perhaps they will repent").

However, this resolution is unsatisfactory: In order to cause the people to ask, "For what do you need this?" Noach did not have to extend the construction; a completed ark would have also {aroused their curiosity and} prompted them to ask Noach why he needed an ark. Our original difficulty persists: Why did Noach prolong his fulfillment of the commandment to "make yourself an ark" for **120 years** (the polar opposite of alacrity)? He should have fulfilled the commandment expeditiously and the completed ark would have caused them to wonder, "For what do you need this?"

We must say that the command to "make yourself an ark" itself necessitated a 120-year period of construction. This is also implied by the wording, "Why, then, did He burden Noach to construct the ark? In order that the people of the Generation of the Flood should see him occupying himself with it for 120 years and ask him..." Noach did not **prolong** the construction for 120 years ("in order that the people should see... and ask him..."); rather, Hashem initially **burdened** him with the task of constructing the ark that **had to** be prolonged for 120 years in order for the people to see, question him, and be inspired to repent.

3.

THE ACT OF CONSTRUCTION

The simple explanation:

According to the simple meaning of Scripture, the phrase, “**Make yourself**” means, “**you** should make.” (As *Abarbanel* says,¹¹ “‘Make yourself’ means that **Noach alone** should construct the ark; he should not delegate the task to others.”) The commandment was that Noach should construct the ark on his own. Furthermore, the *Rogatchover*¹² explains (from a *halachic* standpoint):¹³ Whenever a commandment is expressed using the word “make” {עשה}, the *mitzvah* is delineated by the **action** itself. (Similarly, one only violates a prohibition that is expressed using the verb “make” {עשה} by doing a positive action. If, however, if the sin was caused indirectly, one isn’t liable.)

This {also} applies in our case, regarding the construction of the ark: Since the commandment was introduced by the words, “Make yourself...,” the commandment pertains to the actual construction itself.¹⁴ Consequently, Noach had to complete the entire construction on his own.

[From a *halachic* standpoint, Noach could not have appointed an agent — even if we assume that commandments conveyed with “make” {עשה} can be fulfilled through an agent (and his action would be considered as if the one appointing an agent had done so himself). **Noach**, however, was a gentile and the concept of agency (to the extent that an action is attributed to the one appointing the agent) does not apply to gentiles.]

¹¹ {In his commentary to *Bereishis* 6:14.}

¹² {Rabbi Yosef Rosen, known as the Rogatchover Gaon (genius), was born in 1858, and raised in the Belarusian city of Rogatchev. He served for decades as a rabbi in the Latvian city of Dvinsk (Daugavpils). He was an unparalleled genius, whose in-depth understanding of all Talmudic literature left the greatest of scholars awestruck. He demonstrated that many of the debates between the Talmudic sages have a singular thread and theme. Rabbi Rosen authored tens of thousands of responsa on the Talmud and Jewish law. Many of them have been compiled in the set of volumes called *Tzafnat Paneach*.}

¹³ *Tzofnas Paneach, Bereishis* 6:14.

¹⁴ {This is to preclude the understanding that the intent of the commandment is for a completed Ark and the construction is a necessary step to reach that goal.}

Therefore, it is not surprising that although Noach fulfilled Hashem's commandment with great alacrity, the construction took 120 years to finish. On the contrary, it is wondrous that the construction on his own of such a massive ark took **only** 120 years.

4.

TWO PURPOSES OF THE ARK

The *Rogatchover* presents two alternate perspectives to explain the commandment to construct the ark: either a) the commandment concerned its **actual** construction; or b) the commandment pertained to the ark (that there should be an ark [built]), and not its construction .

We can suggest that the both of the above perspectives depend on the purpose of the ark's construction:

If the purpose of the ark was limited to saving Noach from the flood, then the **construction** itself served no independent purpose, and it was only a means to produce an ark.

If we suggest, however, that the ark was constructed with the intent that, "the people... should see him... and ask... perhaps they will repent," then the construction itself was the *mitzvah* (because it would inspire their repentance).

In this context, we can understand Rashi's explanation, "(Many ways to bring relief and rescue are available to Hashem,) why, then, did He burden Noach to construct the ark? In order that the people of the Generation of the Flood should see him..." By his apparent verbosity, "Why, then, did he bother Noach to construct the ark," Rashi intends to explain more than just why Hashem chose this specific means of "relief and rescue."

According to *pshat*,¹⁵ this question alone is not a (serious) difficulty: An ark is a natural {and logical} means to save people from flood waters. [This is why Rashi does not quote the words of the Midrash:¹⁶ “Couldn’t Hashem have saved Noach by his faith or by his speech, or by raising him up to the heavens”] —

Rather, the primary difficulty is, “Why did He **burden** Noach to build the ark?” Why must **Noach** be burdened with constructing the ark **alone**? Meaning, why was the construction itself a *mitzvah*, thus obligating Noach to work on its construction by himself?

Rashi resolves this difficulty by saying, “in order that the people... should see him”: The burden of constructing the ark was imposed on Noach in order to inspire the people to repent. It is then understood why constructing the ark itself was a *mitzvah*.

5.

THE SIMPLE UNDERSTANDING OF THE VERSE

We must still clarify: Rashi in his Torah commentary explains the simple meaning of the verse. What compels Rashi, from the perspective of *pshat*, to say that the meaning of “make yourself an ark...” is that “He **burdened** Noach...” to build the ark on his own? This difficulty is especially glaring considering that it is difficult to imagine how one person could construct an ark that was “300 cubits...”!¹⁷

Seemingly, it is difficult to answer, as discussed above, that the requirement for Noach to build the ark alone was based on the phrase, “make yourself...” because this (or similar) wording is used in many

¹⁵ {The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of Scripture.”}

¹⁶ *Aggadas Bereishis*, ch.1:2; see also *Tanchuma*, Buber ed., *parshas Bereishis*, sec. 37.

¹⁷ {*Bereishis* 6:15.}

instances and is understood (according to *pshat*) to mean, “yourself — for your needs”¹⁸ {and not — by yourself}; “yourself — from your property.”¹⁹

We can suggest that Rashi’s proof is from the order and continuation of the verses: The commandment to construct the ark is introduced immediately **following** the verse regarding the Generation of the Flood, “The end of all flesh has come before Me... I am about to destroy them from the earth...,”²⁰ and **before** the verse, “As for Me, I am about to **bring** the **flood waters**...,”²¹ which details how the flood will play out. Rashi therefore infers that the commandment, “make yourself an ark...” was not given only for the sake of producing an ark, the outcome of its construction, in order to be saved from the **flood waters**. Rather, there was purpose in the actual construction: the very construction was (also) an independent *mitzvah* — serving as a warning to the Generation of the Flood.

6.

THE GEMARA’S APPROACH

We have said many times that Rashi’s approach in his Torah commentary differs from his approach in his commentary on the *Gemara*. Although in both commentaries, Rashi’s aims to unravel the plain meaning,²² nevertheless, these are two distinct approaches to analysis: The “plain meaning” of the *Gemara* — explaining a passage from the standpoint of *halachah*; and the “plain meaning” of Scripture — explaining the simple meaning of the verses. Consequently, an inconsistency between Rashi’s Torah and Talmud commentary is not grounds for criticism.

This is emphasized in our discussion. In his commentary on tractate *Sukkah*, Rashi says that Shem built the ark together with his father, Noach.

¹⁸ *Radak, Bereishis* 6:14 {so that you will be saved from the impending flood}.

¹⁹ See Rashi on *Bamidbar* 10:2; *Sukkah* 9a {“yourself” precludes a stolen *sukkah*}, et al.

²⁰ *Bereishis* 6:13.

²¹ *Bereishis* 6:17.

²² See *Yad Malachi*, beg. of “*Klalei Rashi*”; et al.

Based on Rashi's *Gemara* commentary, the *Rogatchover*²³ derives that {the second perspective presented above in section 4} "the commandment pertained to the ark and not the construction" is correct, the opposite position presented in Rashi's commentary on Scripture.

The explanation: The verse, understood according to *pshat*, does not imply that Shem helped Noach to build the ark. On the contrary: The conclusion of the verse, "Noach did according to everything Hashem had commanded him, so he did,"²⁴ implies that Noach built the ark **on his own**, as Rashi explains in his commentary.

The above is congruent with the implication of the verses that follow: By prefacing with the commandment, "Make yourself an ark of gopher wood..." the Torah indicates that the commandment pertains to the actual construction itself, as discussed in section 5. [Consequently, the *Midrashim* also concur that the construction of the ark was intended to inspire repentance (therefore, the actual construction of the ark was the *mitzvah*).]

In contrast, Rashi's *Gemara* commentary follows the approach of the *Gemara* (*halachah*). In the *Gemara*:²⁵

a) It says that "The righteous Noach would rebuke the people of his generation and say to them, 'Repent!'" This concept (Noach rebuking the people and inspiring them to repent) is unrelated to the construction of the ark. Even the following clause in the *Gemara* ("The people said to Noach, 'Old man, For what do you need this ark?' He replied, 'The Holy One...'") implies that their question concerned "**this ark**," the existence of the ark {and not its construction}.

b) The *Gemara* does not mention that the making of the ark took 120 years.

²³ *Tzafnas Paneach, Sanhedrin* 108b.

²⁴ *Bereishis* 6:22.

²⁵ *Sanhedrin* 108a-b.

This is Rashi's proof that according to the *Gemara*, the **construction of the ark** was solely to save Noah and his family from the impending flood. Motivating the people to repent was **independent** (unrelated to the ark's construction). In other words, the *mitzvah* was to procure an ark, a task achieved by its construction. Consequently, Noah was not obligated to construct the ark on his own; he was able to enlist the help of others (Shem, etc.).

7.

ANOTHER APPROACH

We can suggest further: Rashi's approach in his commentary on the *Gemara* also maintains that the object of the *mitzvah* was the actual construction of the ark (and not just the procurement of a completed ark). {To address the above difficulty regarding Shem's assistance} Rashi would maintain (as do leading *halachic* authorities)²⁶ that a non-Jew can act as an agent on behalf of another. Therefore, Shem's assistance in constructing the ark, as Noah's agent, would be deemed as if Noah himself had built the ark.

In contrast, Rashi's commentary on the verse assumes the **straightforward understanding** that if a command to do something was addressed to a particular individual, it cannot be discharged through an agent (as explained elsewhere).²⁷ So it is understood that Noah had to construct the ark on his own.

²⁶ *Responsa of Masas Binyomin*, sec. 97; *Shach*, on *Choshen Mishpat*, sec. 243, sub-par. 5; et al.

²⁷ *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 9, p. 39, fn. 28.

8.

A PARALLEL TO SUKKAH

On numerous occasions, we have mentioned that various explanations of the same verse are related to each other. In our case: Regarding the phrase, “make **yourself**” the *Rogatchover* explains,²⁸ “Yourself — **from your property.**” Meaning, Noach had to construct the ark using components belonging to him. We must say that **this** explanation of “make yourself” relates to the above-mentioned explanation that Noach was obligated to construct the ark by himself because the *mitzvah* was the actual construction of the ark .

This {connection between the two explanations} can be clarified by prefacing that a similar expression to the above-mentioned one (regarding the ark) is used regarding the *mitzvah* of *Sukkah*: “You shall make for yourself the festival of *Sukkos*.”²⁹

[Parenthetically, the ark and the *sukkah* are related. *Chassidus*³⁰ explains the *sukkah* represents Noach’s ark as both symbolize peace: Noach’s ark contained all of the different animal species. Nevertheless, an atmosphere of peacefulness prevailed, akin to {the prophecy regarding the time of Moshiach that} “they will neither injure nor destroy.”³¹ In a similar vein, the *sukkah* embodies peace — “spread over us the shelter of Your peace.”³² As our Sages say, “All of the Jewish people are fit to reside in one *sukkah*.”³³]

We see that the above-mentioned elements of the ark [a) the actual construction is a *mitzvah*; b) it must be constructed with parts belonging to

²⁸ *Tzafnas Paneach, Bereishis 6:14.*

²⁹ *Devarim 16:13.*

³⁰ Series of *mammarim* entitled “*Ve’chacha*,” 5637, ch. 95: “As **known**, a *sukkah* and Noach’s ark share one and the same theme.”

³¹ *Yeshayahu 11:9.*

³² {*Maariv* prayer.}

³³ *Sukkah 27b.*

the person; c) the purpose of the completed ark was for salvation] also exist regarding the *sukkah*:

- a) The actual construction of the *sukkah* is a *mitzvah*.³⁴ As such, the *Jerusalem Talmud*³⁵ maintains that before building his *sukkah*, a person must recite the blessing, “...**to construct** the *sukkah*.”
- b) The *sukkah* must belong to the person.³⁶
- c) The purpose of sitting in the *sukkah* is “so that your generations will know that I caused the Jewish people to dwell in *sukkos* when I took them from the land of Egypt.”³⁷ These refer to the Clouds of Glory that encompassed them for the purpose of providing shade to protect them from the heat and sun. In this vein, we have been commanded to construct *sukkos* **that are built for shade**.³⁸

Nevertheless, there are distinctions between the ark and the *sukkah*:

- a) The ark needed to be constructed by Noach by himself. In contrast, a person’s agent may construct a *sukkah* although its construction is a *mitzvah*.
- b) The ark needed to belong to Noach — Noach’s ark. In contrast, “a person... can fulfill his obligation with his friend’s *sukkah* (a borrowed *sukkah*),”³⁹ for “it is considered as his own.”⁴⁰

³⁴ {Note the precise wording in the} *Alter Rebbe’s Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 641, par. 1; *ibid*, sec. 625.

³⁵ *Berachos* 9:3.

³⁶ *Alter Rebbe’s Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 637, par. 3.

³⁷ *Vayikra* 23:43.

³⁸ *Alter Rebbe’s Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim*, sec. 625.

³⁹ *Sukkah* 27b.

⁴⁰ *Alter Rebbe’s Shulchan*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 637, par. 3.

9.

NOACH VS MOSHE *RABBEINU*

We can suggest that the above is related to Noach's general *avodah* regarding the flood. To preface: The *Zohar*⁴¹ contrasts Noach's conduct with the conduct of *tzadikim*⁴² who would live in later generations. Noach did not pray on behalf of his generation — “he did not ask for mercy for the world.” Consequently, the floodwaters are called “Noach's Waters”⁴³ because “they are attributed to him, since he did not ask for mercy for the world.” In contrast, the *tzadikim* who lived in later generations displayed self-sacrifice on behalf of their contemporaries, as Moshe *Rabbeinu* said, “But if not {i.e., if You do not forgive the Jewish people}, erase me now from Your book that You have written!”⁴⁴

In light of this, we must clarify: Our Sages tell us, as discussed above, that Noach reproached the people of his generation and tried to inspire them to repent, proving that Noach was troubled by their situation. Why, then, did he not pray and ask Hashem for mercy on their behalf?

The explanation: Noach did not reproach the people primarily out of self-sacrifice for the people of the Generation of the Flood; rather, he did so in order to fulfill Hashem's command.

Therefore, *Chassidus* explains⁴⁵ that Noach, “did not devote himself to ensure that his reproach and warnings should impact the people and inspire them to repent.” His intent was primarily to fulfill Hashem's command **for himself**. Therefore, “he did not ask (with self-sacrifice like Moshe) for mercy for the world.”

In contrast, Moshe *Rabbeinu* took a personal interest in the state of the Jewish people, for the Jewish people were important to him just as

⁴¹ *Zohar*, vol. 1, 67b ff, 254b; vol. 3, 14b ff.

⁴² {Righteous individuals.}

⁴³ *Yeshaya* 54:9; *Haftarah* for *parshas Noach*.

⁴⁴ *Shemos* 32:32.

⁴⁵ *Sefer HaMaamarim 5700*, p. 29.

himself. Therefore, he sacrificed himself for them; and he prayed and invoked mercy on their behalf, even declaring, “but if {You will} not {forgive the Jewish people}, erase me now from Your book that You have written!”⁴⁶

10.

JEWISH UNITY

This is also the distinction between **Noach’s** ark and Sukkos (which {like all other *mitzvos*} Moshe received from Sinai, and taught, etc.):

The above-mentioned thought that Noach failed to plead for divine mercy on behalf of the people of his generation is reflected in the construction of the ark: This method of rescue (understood simply, from the flood-waters) — the construction of the ark — was only (able to save) Noach and his immediate family and not all of the people. For the same reason, the actual construction was carried out by Noach alone, using components that he owned: “Yourself — from your property.”

Conversely, after the Giving of the Torah, the Jewish people became one unit. Specifically, after entering the Land of Israel, they became responsible for each other;⁴⁷ they became “a single, eternal entity,”⁴⁸ in which every Jew’s life is relevant to the existence of the other.

This is especially true regarding those *mitzvos* that openly express the theme of solidarity {of the Jewish people} — such as *sukkah*, which symbolizes peace (as discussed in section 8) — then the *mitzvah*-actions of another Jew can be considered as if the one who appointed him had done so **himself!** Even a *sukkah* that belongs to another Jew {which he borrows} is deemed to be “actually his own,” since both Jews are “like one body.”⁴⁹ He is thereby able to fulfill his obligation {of sitting in a *sukkah* although the *sukkah* is borrowed}.

- From a talk delivered on the 1st day of *Rosh Chodesh Mar Cheshvan*, 5736 (1975)

⁴⁶ *Shemos* 32:32.

⁴⁷ *Sanhedrin* 43b and Rashi’s commentary there.

⁴⁸ *Responsa of Tzafnas Paneach*, Warsaw edition, sec. 143, par. 2.

⁴⁹ *Taamei Hamitzvos*, by the Arizal, *parshas Kedoshim*.