

SICHA SUMMARY

PROJECT LIKKUTEI SICHOS | 5783 - YEAR OF HAKHEL



Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 20

Noach, Sicha 1

The Context:

Famously, the Talmud records two opinions regarding Noach's righteousness: Some regard him favorably, if he was righteous in his profane generation, how much more so if he had lived in a generation of righteous people. Others interpret it derogatorily: In comparison with his generation he was righteous, but if he had been in Avraham's generation, he would not have been considered of any importance. (Rashi to Bereishis 6:9)

The Question:

Avraham was 58 when Noach passed away. Why, then, do the sages say, "if Noach had lived in Avraham's generation" he would not be considered righteous — he did live in Avraham's generation! By the time he was 58, Avraham had already developed his belief in G-d and began to share this knowledge with his neighbors. So why can Noach not be compared to the standard Avraham set?

The Preface to the Explanation:

To understand this, we first need to understand the Rambam's introduction to the laws of idolatry.

In the first chapter, Rambam writes a lengthy history tracing the development of idolatrous thought; how in the days of Enosh people began to err in their conception of Divine unity, until generations later humanity rejected any recognition of G-d. He then describes how Avraham rediscovered the principles of Divine unity through rational thought at the age of forty, and restored recognition of G-d to his family and the world.

First, a technical question: The Midrash records traditions that Avraham recognized G-d at 3, 48, and 50 years old. Why did Rambam choose the specific age of forty?

And a more fundamental question: The Rambam's Mishneh Torah is a book of law, not history. How is all this narrative of the loss and rediscovery of faith in G-d in the prehistory of the Jewish people relevant to the actual laws of idolatry?

The Explanation:

Idolatry is a unique prohibition in that it does not only proscribe against specific actions, such as performing acts of service to an idol, but it also forbids idolatrous thought and sentiment. The beginning of idolatrous practice is idolatrous thinking — seeing the world as an independent entity from G-d. As Rambam writes in chapter 2: “This implies that the thoughts of your heart should not lead you astray to worship these and make them an intermediary between you and the Creator.”

In order to guard against this prohibition, then, it is critical to know the mistaken thought pattern that can lead to idolatry, and to know the correct intellectual arguments that lead to the recognition of G-d’s unity. Therefore, Rambam prefaces his laws of idolatry with an intellectual history of humankind’s err, and of Avraham’s rediscovery of G-d’s unity, for this is the foundation to fulfilling the prohibition against idolatry.

This is also why Rambam chooses the version of Avraham’s maturity at age forty. Forty is the age associated with intellectual maturity. By using this version, Rambam makes clear that Avraham’s recognition of G-d was an intellectual process that culminated at the age when people reach full intellectual maturity, not a miraculous discovery vouchsafed to him at the age of three.

Further Question:

As his introduction continues, however, Rambam seems to undermine this point. He relates how the Jewish people lost this tradition of Divine unity as they wallowed in Egyptian slavery, and how G-d, in His kindness, gifted it back to them by sending Moshe, the greatest of all prophets.

This seems to suggest that the intellectual understanding of the people was lost in exile, and it could only be restored by a prophet like Moshe, that is, through miraculous Divine intervention.

By inserting this, Rambam clarifies that the intellectual foundation does not suffice. We must also have a profound recognition that G-d transcends the rational realm. Thus, a Jew must possess a deep-seated belief in G-d, and also a comprehensive understanding of G-d’s existence.

The Answer:

Now we can understand the sages’ statement that Noach did not live in “Avraham’s generation.” The meaning of “Avraham’s generation” is that the generation graduated to Avraham’s standard of understanding of, and belief in, G-d. This excludes the time period where Avraham swayed people by the strength of his arguments to believe in G-d. A generation that belongs to Avraham refers to people that have assimilated his ideas until they have become their own ideas. That Avraham’s recognition of G-d has so thoroughly permeated their consciousness that it is their own recognition.

This only occurred when Avraham left Charan for the Land of Israel, when he was 75 years old, long after Noach had passed away. Therefore, Noach did not live in "Avraham's generation," when his ideas and

beliefs were fully integrated with society. If he did live in this time of heightened Divine awareness, some sages say, he would not be considered righteous.
