



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

4 – 5 November, 2005

3 Cheshvan, 5766

Parashat Noach
(Genesis 6:9–11:32)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

There is both a positive way and a negative way to view the events in this week's *parasha*, the famous story of Noach and the flood. On the one hand, the world was destroyed. That's about as negative as you can get. On the other hand, Noach and his family were kept in life, together with all the species of the earth, and after the flood all life was renewed and multiplied greatly. Life is the most positive energy in the known universe.

Similarly, Noach himself can be viewed as either a positive or a negative character. The Torah introduces Noach this way: "This is the line of Noach: Noach was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noach walked with God." (Bereshit 6:9) This sounds like a compliment...but could it also be a criticism?

Rabbi Yochanan understands the description of Noach as a criticism. Noach was a righteous person only "in his age," that is, in the context of the evil times in which he lived. Noach was *relatively* righteous and blameless: He was at the top of a class of underachievers. Had he lived in a more respectable age, he would have been no better than average.

Rabbi Yochanan's *chevruta*, his dearest friend and debating partner in the Beit Midrash study hall, Rabbi Resh Lakish, understands this description of Noach as a compliment. Noach had the moral backbone to be a righteous person despite the evil society in which he lived. Society's standards were low and its corruptive influence hard to resist, so Noach's ability to live his life righteously is all the more impressive. Noach would have been an even more superior person had his generation encouraged goodness.

Rabbi Yochanan emphasizes society's power to shape the behavior of individuals. Resh Lakish champions the individual's ability to withstand the pressures of society and to live according the dictates of principle and morality.

Both are correct of course. Society does greatly impact our values and morals. Yet, ultimately, we are responsible for the people we are, for the deeds we do or fail to do.

The description of Noach's character began: "This is the line of Noach: Noach..." In other words, when we recount the generations that stemmed from Noach, the first person recorded is Noach himself. Noach was the first person to whom he 'gave birth': Noach confronted the moral corruption of his time and decided what kind of person he really was. He himself determined who he would be: *ish tzadik*, a righteous person who walked with God despite the corruption all around.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Michael
Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan 5766

3rd November, 2005