

Joint Service D'var Torah

Sinai Temple and Beth El, Springfield (at Beth El)

SHABBAT EVENING, 4 NOVEMBER 2016

It Depends...

Before I voted my absentee ballot a couple of weeks ago and as I read through the discourses on the four state-wide referenda, I thought to myself, "Okay, so what's right?"

"Well," said I to myself, "It depends on how you look at it." (Some things weren't as clear as others.)

"Well," I said to myself now a second time, "What regarding them then does Judaism say is right?"

"Again," I answered, "It depends on how you look at it."

What's right and what isn't? It's not always clear. And sometimes, even, it's a matter, as I heard said many times as I was growing up, of just "Pay your nickel and take your choice."

Okay, then, from *Noach*, the *parashat hashavua*, the *parashah* of the week, was Noah a good guy or not? Well, certainly, *mid'oraita*, which is the term we use when we say that something is straight from the Torah, *b'derotav*, in his generation, he was the best that there was. But that doesn't fully answer the question. Was Noah a good guy or was he not?

And the answer is, "It depends on whom you ask (and by "whom" I'm not meaning the members of Sinai or Beth El or our respective clergies. I'm talking now about giants from our tradition. There's Resh Lakish, one of our biggies, who says, "Unqualifiedly Noah is a good guy...at any time." And then there's R. Yochanan, another biggy, who says, "Well, in his generation, certainly, but not [necessarily] in other generations." And they each in the Talmud have their respective supporters who lay out the logic that proves the correctness of each of the two opposing views.¹

I learned at HUC that there is no such thing as "Judaism" that straightaway covers everything in our vast tradition. Ours is a developmental faith, and it comprises a whole string of religions. each called Judaism, and which often contradict one another. And they often don't agree on what is right or what isn't.

Among the things that I regularly read are halachic discourses on what often are

¹ Sanh. 108a, where R. Chanina proves R. Yochanan and R. Oshaya proves Resh Lakish.

contemporary religious practices. I find them fascinating, especially as I watch opposing sides square off at one another in an attempt to prove that theirs is the way we ought to practice as against another way. And even from the Talmud, which so scrupulously went out of its way always to preserve dissenting opinions, the *halachah*, generations after the Talmud was finished, often flip-flops in the codes and calls what in the Talmud was the dissent now *the* law that defines how we practice.

So about the original question, what's right, let's return, really just for a moment, to the opening words of the *parashah*, נַח אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו. Noah was a completely righteous man, a *tzaddik*, in his generation. That's one translation of the passage.

So why a *tzaddik*? The Tanchuma, in a midrash we learned the other night at our Executive committee meeting at Sinai, says he was a *tzaddik* because he spent so much time caring for God's creatures, specifically all of the animals that he non-stop spent months feeding and caring for during the time he and his family and the animals were all closed up in the ark.² The SPCA would love that midrash!

But then there's something further to read from the same passage: נַח אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו, and this time I translate it following the word order of the passage. Noah was a man, a *tzaddik*, completely, in his generation. And the question becomes now, why does the passage have to bother to tell us that Noah was a man? That's obvious, and the full meaning of the passage could have been derived without the word אִישׁ, man, being stated at all!

Well, by our rules of interpreting, there are no extraneous words in Torah. And the text tells us – and from this I think the text is now suggesting – that first, before anything else, Noah was not just a man but a *mensch*, now my translation and with what is *our* full understanding of what the word *mensch* means. Before a *tzaddik*, before completely anything, the key is *menschlichkeit*, acting decently toward people. That, by extension, whether in his generation or any other generation, is what set Noah apart.

So what's right, and what isn't? It depends on how you look at it. But, as a lesson from the *parashah*, and especially at this particular moment just days before this incredibly contentious presidential election, the hope is that human decency, of the candidates and, for that matter, all the rest of us too, will hopefully prevail. But that's not just about this generation. It's about any generation, here, everywhere, and always.

²Midrash Tanchuma (Buber) Parashat Noach, chapter 4.