

Noach

Volume 1 Issue 2

Noach is about Mesiras Nefesh.

I couldn't help but analyze a conversation on Facebook that was started by a "friend" of mine who posed the following question to his followers: "How much did you spend on your lulav and esrog?". The responses, but likeminded people ranged from a few dollars to I think \$65 was the maximum someone spent on their Lulav set. The poser of the question, and his echo chamber of followers tend to be on a more liberal spectrum of Jewish practice. What fascinated me was how the sentiment of the comments was how it seemed crazy that the lulav set would "cost so much". (I will digress for a second, that obviously ideally these things should cost less than more, and "hiddur" mitzvah isn't necessarily driven by how much a person spends. Is a bottle of wine tastier because it cost more of the quality of the grapes is there? Sometimes there is a correlation, but often its psychological and not reality, and an expensive bottle isn't necessarily qualitatively better.)

What fascinated me about the conversation was my judging that there was a purported lack of Mesiras Nefesh (full discloser I am judging the people without having conversed as to their motives, this is the thought that was triggered in me, and got me thinking about mesiras nefesh in my own life). Mesiras Nefesh literally translates as martyrdom, but as the Shaloh explains on the final "Shema" of Neila when all the prayers are over, one must contemplate giving their soul to God in sacrifice, and then, they will merit the reward that comes with that self-sacrifice- even if it doesn't literally mean dying. Why is this axiom at the culmination of the Neila prayers, and why is that one must be ready to achieve self-sacrifice?

Without Chassidus, I'm not sure how to answer this question, and I will not suggest that a good answer doesn't exist beyond the ethos of chassidus. But since I have a proclivity and knowledge of some concepts in chassidus, I will choose to answer this question using chassidus.

Chassidus explains that mesiras nefesh is not necessarily the literal self-sacrifice resulting in death as one may colloquially interpret mesiras nefesh to be. Rather, mesiras nefesh is an axiom for how one ought to live their life. That is in constant sacrifice for service to Hashem. That means when the crowds are going one way, because that seems easiest, you force yourself to go

the other way. When you're in bed at night and you haven't davened Maariv, you get up and Daven.

So, Noach and the retelling of the story of the flood is one of Mesiras Nefesh. There are the obvious signs of his sacrifice, and that is when the generation around him was trying to convince him to live their lifestyle he stalwartly refused- a blatant act of self-sacrifice (Rabbi Yohanan Sanhedrin 108a). Hashem in the end of Bereishis recounts that the state of affairs in the world from Adam until just before Noach was so bad that he would have reversed creation and brought man back to dust. Rashi explains there (source) that this would have caused the world to cease to exist. As I wrote on Parshas Bereishis, the sum of the creation was the creation of Adam to serve Hashem-and if man would seize to exist, the world ought not remain in existence either- that is until Noach was born- and "he found favor in the eyes of Hashem" (source).

The importance of understanding Mesiras Nefesh as a Hashkafa of how to serve Hashem is clear through the Tosefta (Sota 3:10) that is quoted in Sanhedrin (108a). "The sages taught in a b'raisa, the generation of the flood sinned due the goodness that Hashem bestowed on them" (and the gemara there quotes a few places in Job to support this)...The gemara continues (Sanhedrin 108a) to describe quoting Job that the people of Noach's generation attributed to their credit all their successes. They deviated from recognizing that rivers that provide water and sustenance comes from Hashem but they said, why pray to Hashem if there are rivers...Hashem therefore said in "with the goodness I gave to them, they infuriate me and I will sentence them and I will bring the flood of the water" (Bereishis 6:17).

Beyond the great sins described above, the people of the time also became haughty due to "the covetousness of the eyeball" (sefaria.com translation of Sanhedrin 108a) which is similar to water". There is a connection between water and the eyeball. The Alter Rebbe in the first perek of Tanya states that "nefesh is clothed in the blood which gives life to the body; and from this nefesh all negative inclinations stem, which are derived from the four elements within (air, fire, water, and earth). Anger and pride emanate from fire which rises up, and the appetite for pleasure emanates from the element of water, for water promotes growth of all kinds of pleasure giving things (translation from Lessons in Tanya Perek 1).

The negative faculties described by the Alter Rebbe, and the subsequent chapters of Tanya which seek to teach the adherent ways to conquer the negative inclinations is echoed in the Shema prayer, in the third portion.

“vayomer”. In the Torah it says “do not follow after your heart and after your eyes by which you go astray, so that you may remember and fulfill all my Mitzvohs and be holy to Hashem...” The fact that Hashem uses the eyes as a matter of using to go astray from is the key point here. It is obvious not to “go after your heart” as that is irrational, nor are other methods of possible negative “going after” mentioned (such as going after evil thoughts, or unjust thinking). The specific use of going after one’s eyes, while obvious-you typically see things you lust after-but deeper and based on the connection to the sin of the generation of the flood-is that it can lead to such chaos that the world ought to be overturned, as had been threatened, and subsequently redeemed through the flood.

As the gemara (Sanhedrin 109/109) points out the punishment had to be through water. I will go out on a limb, that once Hashem’s wrath was highlighted in the posuk at the end of Bereishis (6:6) the word described is “Vayinachem” וינחם (and he reconsidered having created man for their evil ways). This root of this word is “nun ches” i.e. Noach, the remaining three letters spell “v’yam – noach” that is “and [with] water, I will [make] rest”. Water has a unique halachic feature of being able to purify things that are unholy through immersion in a Mikveh. One of the Chassidic explanations of this is that water has the ability to surround the entire body “makif” and one can come to purify themselves if they are “makif” their lives with spirituality and holiness. (Halachik commentaries delve into the minutiae of the implications of size of the mikveh, and if there are instances barring a person from attaining purity through immersion.)

As the Torah states “do not stray after your heart or eyes...so you may be holy...” is therefore directly connected to the story of Noach, the flood, and being holy. And in a world that was devoid of holiness, (through pursuit of following after one’s eyes) resulted in the great flood.

How does one conquer their inclination not to go after one’s eyes and heart and risk becoming like the generation of the flood? Chassidus explains, Mesiras Nefesh- self sacrifice, martyrdom, knowing you can do more than you do.

I am a big advocate for sound mental health, and I would not suggest for a moment that a person with a proclivity to unstable or unhealthy behaviours ought to avoid additional stress of “not doing enough”. My point isn’t for undo pressure, it’s for self-reflection. It is the voice in your head telling you that for this and this action (specifically mitzvah) you can always do more. This is

why the Rebbe always told his adherents and the chassidim around him just as a person who has \$200 want \$400 so too, one should come to a point in their desire for conducting mitzvahs that when they have an opportunity to do it, they do, and more, and then they continue the trend. People look for inspiration in their lives to increase productivity, to feel better about themselves by adopting “best practice” behaviours that may or may not change their lives. One important tenet of these self-help guides is to “push yourself past your comfort zone” or to “quit the negative behaviours that are detracting from your ability to be free”. L’havdil Mesiras Nefesh is the Torah’s and interpreted by Chassidic master’s method by which one can achieve greatness. It is no wonder than when the Gemara (Chagiga 9b; as quoted in Tanya Perek 15) tells us that the difference between a righteous man and a wicked one is he who serves Hashem, but more importantly as the Alter Rebbe quotes from Chagiga, that it is about one who reviews Torah 101 times. One cannot simply say that because they learned a passage 100 times they are done, they need to learn it for a one hundred first time, because that is the difficult thing to do, that is the self-sacrifice the discomfort that one ought to pursue to achieve- as Noach is compared, to being favourable in Hashem’s eyes, even in an environment that is not conducive to such behaviours.

People are rewarded for being “against the grain” and mesiras nefesh in Judaism is the going against the grain that Hashem demands from us, as we are “all Tzadikim” (Sanhedrin 90a). Even though in other places there is an explanation for this statement from Sanhedrin 90a, nonetheless, it states that we can all achieve righteous status, as that is what Noach is called, “Ish Tzadik, Tamim Haya B’dorosav” (Bereishis 6:9).