It's in Your Mind: Thoughts for Parashat Noah

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By

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It sometimes happens that people have an authentic and precious tradition—but they don't appreciate it! They want something new and different, something more "relevant," something that will supposedly appeal to the masses. The Talmud (Arakhin 10b) describes an amazing situation that transpired during the days of our ancient Temple in Jerusalem.

They had a reed musical instrument in the Temple dating back to the days of Moses! The King decided to have it coated with gold; but then the sound of the instrument was not pleasant. So the gold coating was removed and the sound of the instrument was pleasant as before.

There could hardly have been a more authentic reed instrument than the one dating back to the days of Moses. But somehow, the King--and the people--were not satisfied with it. The King thought it should be improved. So he had it coated with gold. The result of this "improvement" was to damage the instrument and ruin its beautiful sound. So they removed the gold, and the sound of the instrument returned to its former glory.

But now, after the gold was removed, the instrument was just the same as it had been at the beginning—when the King and the people were not satisfied with it. Why did it now sound beautiful to them?

I think that this episode is describing a classic phenomenon. People have something of authenticity and beauty. But they become dissatisfied for a variety of reasons. They decide to throw money at the problem. Expensive "improvements" are made; but people now miss the original, authentic thing. So the "improvements" are removed, and people are happy again. It's not that the musical instrument has changed from its original quality; it's that the people's mindset has changed. They now appreciate the value of what they had in the first place. The experiment taught them that they had undervalued the reed instrument, an item that dated back to the time of Moses.

The Talmud goes on to tell about a bronze bell in the Temple whose tone deteriorated. The sages sent for artisans from Alexandria in Egypt, to come to

Jerusalem to repair the bell. The artisans repaired it; but now the sound was not as pleasant as it had been originally. The sages then ordered the removal of the “improvements” made by the Alexandrian artisans, and the sound of the bell was now as pleasant as it originally had been. Likewise, there was a pestle in the Temple, dating back to the days of Moses, that was used to crush the spices. The pestle became impaired and was not grinding as well as before. They brought in expert artisans from Alexandria who fixed the pestle. But now, the pestle was worse! They removed the “improvements” and the pestle then worked as excellently as it originally did.

Here, too, the people had items of unsurpassed tradition—going back to Moses! But they felt these items were not functioning as well as they should. So they called in artisans from Alexandria.

Isn’t this strange? Weren’t there any artisans in the entire land of Israel who could repair a bell or a pestle? Even if some extra skill is involved in tuning a bell, how difficult could it be to sand down a pestle?

I think these stories allude to another feature of human nature. When people become dissatisfied with something, they want to call in “outside experts.” They think that outsiders will bring new skills that they themselves lack. It sounds reassuring to tell the public that international experts have been called in to solve our problem.

But the experts fail to improve the situation. On the contrary, things are now worse. So the “improvements” are removed—and everything is back to the way it used to be. The bell sounds great; the pestle grinds perfectly. It’s not that the quality of the bell or pestle has actually changed; it’s that the people’s mindset has changed. They have come to realize and to treasure the authentic beauty of what they had in the first place. They realized that “outside experts” did not have anything to offer to make things better; on the contrary, they worsened the situation.

Yet, there was some benefit to throwing money at a problem and calling in outside experts. Only after these strategies were implemented did people come to realize the value of what they had originally. Without these failed attempts at improving things, a spirit of malaise and dissatisfaction might have continued unabated. Fortunately, the Temple leadership was wise enough to remove the "improvements" and return things to their original purity and authenticity.

This week’s Torah portion is named for Noah, who is described in the Torah as a righteous man who walked with the Lord. The 16th century sage, Rabbi Eliezer Azikri, cites a rabbinic teaching that one of Noah’s great qualities is reflected in his name. The word “noah” can be translated as “serene,” “comfortable,” “calm.” Noah did not get ruffled by the vicissitudes of life. He kept an objective eye on things, kept things in balance. He appreciated that which should be appreciated, and rejected that which should be rejected. Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord because he was “noah”—a serene, clear sighted person.

In our own lives, when we find ourselves confused or dissatisfied, it is helpful to draw on the quality of “noah.” We should strive for authenticity and eschew falseness. We should be calm and serene in judgment, and not allow ourselves to be drawn into hurtful strategies that undermine what is important in our lives.

Angel for Shabbat