Remembering the Anonymous: Thoughts for Parashat Noah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Noah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Dr. Roger Mesznik, a longtime friend and member of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, recently gave me two books in which he traced his family's genealogy—with both Sephardic and Ashkenazic roots. In the Prologue to his book on the Mesznik family, he notes that "in some cases we know more about their deaths than about their lives. History has conspired to leave more records about how and when they died than about who they were, what they dreamed of, and what they were about to become, or aspired to be."

This profound observation is true of so many human beings who have lived and died, and who left only faint—if any—traces of who they actually were. Indeed, over the past thousands of years, billions of people have died and have sunk into eternal anonymity.

And yet, all of these anonymous ancestors played their roles on the stage of human history. They had families and friends; they worked, played, dreamt, struggled, rejoiced, mourned, hoped. Although we have little trace of who they were, they impacted in some way on the progression of human history.

This week's Torah portion relates the story of Noah, the great flood, the survival of Noah's family, the beginning of a new chapter of humanity. The Torah tells us that Noah took his wife, sons and daughters-in-law onto the ark with him. But it doesn't give us the names of Mrs. Noah, Mrs. Shem, Mrs. Ham or Mrs. Yafeth. These women are left in anonymity. Yet, according to Biblical tradition, these women were the matriarchs of all later humanity, including us! Why don't we know anything about them, even their names?

Tradition attempts to fill in historical vacuums so that the Midrash in Bereishith Rabba refers to Noah's wife as Naamah. In the Dead Sea Scrolls her name is given as Emzara. Other sources have provided her with other names. These sources were uncomfortable leaving Mrs. Noah without a name of her own. Giving a name, even if fictitious, is an attempt to ascribe an identity to an otherwise anonymous individual.

Let us try to imagine something about the life of Noah's wife. Her husband was righteous; he defied the immoral society in which his family lived. He must have been a social outcast, being viewed as a self-righteous trouble maker. He spent years building the ark and must have been subjected to scorn

and abuse by the public. Noah obviously had moral strength but he must have been pained and isolated. It was his wife who stood by him and with him, who gave him the courage and confidence to persist. Without her support, Noah may well have failed in his mission. Mrs. Noah was a heroic person who shared the trials of her husband.

By omitting reference to Mrs. Noah's name, perhaps the Torah is thereby imparting a vital lesson. Some of the most important people in history—and in our own times—are people who may be entirely unknown to us. Their behind the scenes sacrifices, courage and faith have helped shape and strengthen the moral fabric of society. Thank you Mrs. Noah!