Raising a Tzadik: Thoughts for Parashat Noah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Noah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Many years ago, we were visiting friends when one of their sons, about seven or eight years old, came into the room. We chatted with him a bit, and my wife asked him: “what do you want to be when you grow up?” Without a moment of hesitation, he answered: “I want to be a Tzadik.” Other boys might have answered that they wanted to be baseball players or firemen; but this little boy wanted to grow up to be a righteous Jew, a good man, a Tzadik.

Many years later, this little boy did indeed grow up to be a Tzadik. He is pious, learned, honest; he and his wife are raising their children also to be righteous Jews.

The child had the ingredients to grow into a wonderful man but his parents were the ones who created the home environment that nurtured his talents and gave direction to his life.

In this week’s Torah portion, we are informed that Noah was a Tzadik, a righteous and pure human being who walked with God. How did Noah achieve this high level of goodness? Obviously. he had innate wisdom and strength of character to be able to withstand the corrupt society in which he lived. But he also needed to be nurtured by devoted parents.

When he was born, Noah was given that name by his father Lemech, because “he will comfort us (yenahameinu) in our work and in the toil of our hands.” Lemech (and presumably his wife too) somehow sensed that Noah was destined for something special. They raised him so that he internalized those aspirations.

Good parents create environments that enable their children to flourish. Even the best of parents don’t succeed every time, and even the worst of parents sometimes produce wonderful children. But as a rule, a nurturing home plays a vital part in human development.

To raise a Tzadik, parents must themselves live by the values they wish to convey to their children. Otherwise, the children will quickly realize that the parents are not sincere, not truthful, not worthy of emulation.

What’s true of parents and children is also true of rabbis, teachers, and everyone else who wishes to impact on others. Good role models help generate good followers. Bad role models generate negative results.

When I was a rabbinical student, Rabbi Israel Miller (of blessed memory) told us: “A rabbi’s sermons are meaningful not only for what the rabbi says, but more for who the rabbi is.” If the rabbi preaches

charity, but is not charitable; if the rabbi speaks of prayer, but is not prayerful; if the rabbi sermonizes about humility, but is vain and egocentric—then the rabbi's messages will ring false. An inauthentic rabbi is not—and cannot be—a role model of authentic Judaism.

Noah lived in a corrupt society but was able to be a Tzadik, a pure person who walked with God. This is surely a tribute to Noah's greatness. But it also is a tribute to Mr. and Mrs. Lemech, Noah's parents, who provided the spiritual and moral nourishment that sustained Noah…and saved humanity.