When Righteousness Isn't Enough: Thoughts for Parashat Noah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Noah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In the first verse of this week's Parasha, Noah is introduced as a righteous (*tsadik*) and whole-hearted (*tamim*) man. He was unique in his generation when "the earth was filled with violence." The Almighty decided to wipe out humanity but to spare Noah and family. He commanded Noah to build an ark and provided exact specifications of what needed to be done. The Torah informs us that "Noah did according to that which God commanded him."

But then the Torah continues with God's instruction to Noah to enter the ark with his family, "for I have seen you as righteous (*tsadik*) before Me in this generation." Although Noah had followed God's commands exactly, he was now called *tsadik* (righteous) but no longer *tamim* (whole-hearted). It seems that God noticed a defect in Noah's behavior and demoted him accordingly.

But what was the defect? Noah had done exactly as commanded. Why was he no longer *tamim*? Why was he no longer described as being "whole-hearted?"

What is the chief characteristic of a *tsadik?* A *tsadik* acts with *tsedek*, justice. Rules are followed, commitments are kept. The Talmud (Pesahim 8a-b) discusses the case of a father who prays for the health of an ill child. If the father states that he will give charity on condition that God will heal the child, the father is considered to be totally righteous (*tsadik gamur*). Yet, this prayer seems far from ideal. Why should the father be deemed righteous by making a bargain with God? Rabbi Hayyim Yosef Azulai, a great sage of the 18th century, commented: The father is righteous—but not pious. Righteousness entails making commitments and keeping them. The father strikes a bargain that he intends to fulfill exactly. But he lacks piety.

What is the chief characteristic of a *tamim*? A *tamim* is whole-hearted, pure, pious. A *tamim* doesn't simply follow rules but operates with a much larger religious vision. At the beginning of the Parasha, Noah is described as having both qualities—a *tsadik* and a t*amim*. When God commanded Noah to build the ark, he did so exactly as he was instructed. He was a *tsadik.* But God had expected more than mere righteousness; He wanted whole-heartedness, love, piety. Yes, Noah followed instructions; but why didn't he first pray to God and ask forgiveness for the people? Why didn't he demonstrate feelings of human solidarity? Why didn't he challenge God as Abraham and Moses did in later generations?

Noah, in following the rules as a *tsadik*, did not maintain his quality of being a *tamim*. Religion demands both proper conduct and proper sentiment--adherence to the demands of justice and a grand religious vision characterized by love of God and humanity. God expected Noah—and us—to be not only righteous but to be whole-hearted, pure, loving, visionary. Are we up to it?