



Virtue Ethics • Parshat Noach

Was Noah an ethical person?

While some commentaries find fault with Noah, it is hard to circumvent the explicit accolades that “Noah was a righteous person (*ish tzadik*) and perfect (*tamim*) in his generation” (Gen. 6:9). Even if we read “in his generation” like Rabbi Yohanan, limiting his greatness to that particular era (Sanhedrin 108a), these phrases are still high praises for Noah. The commentaries distinguish between the three terms, “person,” “righteous,” and “perfect,” providing us with a brief moral treatise, spotlighting Noah as an exemplar of virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics, an idea usually attributed to Aristotle, is an ethical theory which focuses on cultivating internal characteristics that lead us to act morally. In contrast to the theory that ethics is about following rules (deontology), or about obtaining the best outcomes (utilitarianism), virtue ethics emphasizes developing the internal motivation to do the right thing for the right reasons.

While Jewish ethics contains a deontological element, reflected in the imperative to follow Jewish law, Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, following the lead of some 20th century Jewish philosophers, argues that there is also a strong thread of Jewish virtue ethics, particularly evident in the writings of Rambam (“The Implications of a Jewish Virtue Ethic,” 2000). One resonant example is when Rambam writes that it is better to give a thousand individual coins to different poor people, rather

than giving a thousand coins to one poor person (*Commentary on the Mishna Avot 3:18*). While a utilitarian may argue that the best outcome would be to substantively help one pauper, Rambam instead focuses on the character of the donor. The habit of giving, formed by the many smaller donations, will better cultivate the trait of magnanimity.

Noah’s virtue ethics are first reflected in the word *ish* (person). Abarbanel writes that *ish* indicates that Noah is someone of stature, having earned respect from his community. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes, “according to the remarks of our sages, the name *ish* is not lightly used in the Tanach.” If the term is used to describe someone, it means that he earned that title by proving his worth through refined character. For Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *ish* signifies a person with “*daat*,” or intellectual acumen (Darash Moshe, p. 4). One cannot be righteous or perfect, unless one also possesses practical wisdom.

Other commentaries point to Noah’s virtuous character by distinguishing between the terms “righteous” and “perfect.” For instance, Rabbeinu Bahya writes that being “righteous” refers to avoidance of immoral behavior and the performance of moral action, while being “perfect” indicates that Noah was internally virtuous. Noah did not just follow the rules, or make ethical decisions based on the best outcome, but acted based on virtue ethics. His morality was not just

an external expression but was reflective of a pure heart and mind. Noah did not just perform acts of righteousness, but he was righteous.

In a time where we are suffering from the

moral corruption and atrocities perpetrated by Hamas, we must respond by modeling virtue and embodying truth, justice, and righteousness.

*Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman is an assistant professor at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, associate faculty at the Sacks-Herenstein Center, and the author of *Psyched for Torah: Cultivating Character and Well-Being through the Weekly Parsha*.*

Character Challenge: Consider following Maimonides' advice for the cultivation of the virtue of generosity: repeatedly perform numerous small acts of charity throughout the day. Particularly resonant and timely, join us by standing with Israel and participating in the Global Day of Loving-Kindness on Sunday, October 22nd.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "None of us, as individuals, can end climate change, bring peace to the Middle East, cure the world of disease or bring justice and compassion to the international arena. But we can each do our individual best. And we can, quietly, develop the strengths of character that will make a difference not only to our own lives but to those around us. That, according to the Rambam (in his *Eight Chapters*) is what Judaism is about, the cultivation of character through the repeated acts we call mitzvot and the way of life we call halachah" ("Cultivating the Inner Self," Rosh Hashana 5776)