

Shlichut of a Nation

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Following the culmination of the great flood, Hashem makes a covenant with Noach^[1]. The wording of this covenant bears similarity to the wording of the famous covenant made later between Hashem and Avraham Avinu;^[2] the big difference between them is their tone. While by Noach the tone of the covenant is businesslike, the tone used with Avraham is personal. Hashem was not looking to make a deal with Avraham, he was looking to establish an eternal and intimate relationship.

Could the second and obviously better covenant have been made ten generations earlier? What was Noach missing that prevented him from being worthy of this covenant? What about the other righteous individuals who preceded Avraham, such as Enoch, Methuselah, Shem, Eber, and Ashur?^[3] Were none of these men worthy?

To answer this question we need to understand the terms of each covenant. The covenant with Noach is one sided. Hashem promises to never destroy the world and its inhabitants, while no pledge is requested of, nor provided by Noach. (The seven Noahide Laws, some of which are mentioned right before the covenant, are understood by Chazal to predate Noach by ten generations.^[4] Along with the first and most basic commandment given to man, “be fruitful and multiply,” these laws are merely reiterated now.) By Avraham, however, both sides bear responsibility. Hashem promises Avraham a land and a nation, but instructs Avraham to go in his ways and closes with covenant with the commandment of circumcision. In addition, the covenant with Avraham is conducted as a dialogue while no response from Noach is mentioned by his covenant.

Avraham’s covenant requires work. Being part of the Jewish nation requires work. One of the goals we have as a nation is to be a light to the world. With this in mind, let’s return to our original question: Why wait for Avraham? Although we don’t know much about the aforementioned righteous people, there are a couple of sources which provide relevant insights, including Midrash Tehillim:^[5]

Five stood right in the world: Noach, Shem, Ever, Ashur and Avraham. Noach didn’t dedicate himself to God, rather he planted a vineyard. Shem and Ever shut themselves away, Ashur said “How can I live amongst these sinners” and left, as it says: *from the land came Ashur*. Avraham’s righteousness stands forever: He said I will not abandon Hashem.

Avraham displayed a quality that was lacking in those who lived before him. He looked at the world and saw corruption, but instead of turning away from

the world like the others mentioned, he took action to fix it. This trait is displayed in the majority of stories we know about Avraham and this is what made him worthy of a covenant of responsibility.

As the nation promised to Avraham in the merit of this attribute, we have the responsibility to continue in his way of taking initiative and being what Hashem and the world need us to be.

[1] Breishit 9:9-17

[2] Breishit 17:1-21

[3] See for example Rambam Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:2

[4] Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 56b

[5] Midrash Tehillim 118

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