

Walking with God

AS a philosophy teacher, a common question is about moral relativism. Are morals absolute and unchanging, or do they reflect the social norms of the day? Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher, asked if a child brought up in a den of thieves could be morally culpable for theft.

This week's parashah poses a similar dilemma. The very first sentence tells us that "Noah was a righteous man, *in his generations*". Immediately the eyebrows are raised, as the Torah puts Noah's righteousness in the context of his generation. Words are not wasted in biblical text. Rashi tells us that by

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comparison with his wicked contemporaries Noah was righteous. But Rashi goes on to say that had he lived in Abraham's time, he would have been insignificant.

This should be the end of it. He was relatively decent despite the depravity of his generation. Yet in the very next sentence, the Torah goes on to make a remarkable claim: "et haElokim hit'halech Noach – and

Noah walked with God". This can be taken in one of two ways.

On the one hand, maybe it was God who himself propped up Noah, providing him with support and sustenance in order to keep him good. This is Rashi's understanding, and reminds us of Mary Stevenson's poem about a dream when she was walking along a beach and the footprints of her life, accompanied by God's, were behind her. She noticed that during the most difficult periods of her life there was only one set of footprints and she asked why, at this time, God abandoned her. God replied that during her times of trial and suffering, it was then that He carried her.

Another reading could be that such was Noah's strength and decency in the face of adversity, such was his moral fortitude, that God maintained a relationship with Noah. The 2014 film *Noah*, which if you are a fan of quality cinema I urge you to give a miss (I on the other hand have no such discerning eye and will happily watch drivel) portrays Noah as a religious zealot. This zealotry comes through when Noah's dogmatic insistence on building the ark is unrelenting despite the incredulity of those around him.

So is God walking with Noah as a partner or propping up his flawed character? And is Noah praised for

righteousness in and of itself or is he relatively good? And are we admiring his zealotry or his decency.

Whatever your reading of the parashah, there is a lesson for us all. In times of trouble it is our inner strength and character that will sustain us, but the absence of support makes our job much harder. Community-building (or in Noah's case ark-building) is a team effort that requires vision, determination, and if a bit of divine intervention comes along, who are we to complain?!

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