

Parshat Noach
What's Your Name Again?
Phoebe Ana Rabinowitsch - Class of 2022

I have a really bad habit; when I meet new people and introduce myself and ask their names, I often do not pay enough attention to the answer. I am so caught up in learning *about* that person, listening to their story and who they are, that unless there is a nametag, I often miss a very important part. Remembering the content of a conversation and the person's character and identifying traits are arguably more important, but without their name, it can be hard to place them.

This week's parsha begins with the story of Noah, referred to as an *ish tzadik*¹, a righteous man, in contrast to the rest of the people on Earth who were corrupt and full of lawlessness. Before the flood, God decides to save Noah and his family, stating that Noah was the only righteous person in his entire generation. Rashi comments:

בדרותיו. יש מרביתינו דורשים אותו לשבח, כל שכן אלו היה בדור צדיקים היה צדיק יותר; ויש שדורשים אותו לגנאי, לפי דורו היה צדיק ואלו היה בדורו של אברהם לא היה נחשב לכלום (סנה' ק"ח):

"In his generation" means there are some rabbis that explain this as praise and were he living among a generation of tzaddikim, he would have been a greater tzaddik. Others, however, explain it to his diminish his status: Noah was only a tzaddik in comparison to his generation, and were he to have lived in the generation of Abraham, he would not be considered important at all.

So what does this mean for Noah? Is he recognized because he is actually great, or is it a backhanded sort of compliment, and he is only recognized because everyone else around him is so bad? I think about this type of situation a lot in communities. Are people viewed as kind because everyone around them seems to be mean? Or maybe someone is considered quiet because those around them talk a lot and make a lot of noise? Do we identify people with their dominant character traits or by what makes them different and sets them apart? Perhaps it is the name that is important, like at a school when everyone knows the name of the building but not everyone knows why or what the namesake was known for.

After the flood had subsided, it is stated that God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and domesticated animals (Genesis 8:1). God destroyed the Earth and started anew after the flood. Specific people and animals were saved, and then restarted from this baseline. In remembering Noah, God remembers the covenant to never flood and destroy in the same manner again. According to Radak, it is not possible for God to remember anything, because in order to remember, God has to have forgotten. It says "God remembered" because this is a way for us to understand that Noah is still in the picture, and essential to the continuation of humanity.

¹ Genesis 6:9: ויז:ט Ish tzadik: Righteous man

(א) ויזכור, אין שכחה ואין זכרון לפניו יתברך, כי לשון זכרון הוא אחר השכחה, אלא דברה תורה בלשון בני אדם להבין השומעים...

"And God remembered. There is no forgetting and no remembering before the Blessed One, because the language of remembering comes after forgetting. So rather the Torah is speaking in the language of human beings so that we will understand."

Between the flood and the Tower of Babel, there is a list of descendants. It could have just said there were many generations. Instead, we document the names, and read them out loud as a part of the story, to remember the people who came before. However, in the narrative of the Tower of Babel, no one is named, yet they talk about making a tower so big and so great, as a way to "make a name for ourselves." After the destruction of the tower, and confusion of languages, again we have another list of descendants. It is ironic that those who were most concerned with making a name for themselves, are in the end unnamed.

Why might the unnamed people of Babel think they are so great to be able to reach the heavens and be as great as God? How could a group of people be so self-absorbed? While they were united in their efforts, they tried to accomplish something that was outside of their boundaries as people, which God recognized and punished with the loss of communication. Originally, the people are all the same. They can communicate, and are all on the same page, but it is harmful. After God confused their languages and disperses them, people have both similarities and differences, they can function as individuals and also as a collective. God made it harder to work together, and we, as people still need to learn to find other strategies to accomplish our goals. We should appreciate the unique character traits that sets someone apart from everyone else. A good team is made of up different roles, filled with individuals with different skills and ideas that need to be recognized in order to work together. We all just want to be seen as a person, for our uniqueness and humanity, and to be recognized by name, not forgotten.



Phoebe Ana Rabinowitsch holds a B.A. in Religion and Anthropology from American University. Phoebe Ana has completed various internships including at Hillel International and a national voter registration campaign. Phoebe Ana studied at Hebrew University of Jerusalem and at Middlebury College Language Schools. She has studied Torah at Drisha, Hadar and Pardes, where she was involved in organizing a weekly partnership minyan. She has experience teaching English as a Second Language to adult learners and Hebrew and Judaic studies at various religious schools in New York City. Phoebe Ana is an active participant in a monthly women's rosh chodesh group that brings together text to discuss health and wellness and the relationship to being a Jewish woman today. Phoebe Ana is committed to exploring how beliefs and practices can help create supportive and nourishing environment and is interested in further exploring the field of chaplaincy and pastoral education. She lives in Washington Heights, New York.