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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

NOACH: A HIGH SCHOOL SEMINAR TRANSCRIPT

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(Note: A seminar is a class discussion with rigorous and formal canons of discussion, often including a requirement that opinions be backed by specific textual evidence. In today's class, every student is required to make at least one substantive contribution to receive a passing grade.)

Teacher: Today's seminar will begin from a very brief opening thesis/dvar Torah by Gittel.

Gittel: *Hashem wanted people to be good, but they were bad and getting worse. Hashem warned them that bad things would happen, but they didn't listen. Finally He destroyed the world in a flood, leaving only Noach and his family alive.*

We should learn from this that we really need to be good, and that we should believe people when they say that Hashem will destroy the world if we're not good.

Rivky: But didn't Hashem promise that He would never bring another Flood? I think the lesson is that if people tell us that Hashem will destroy the world if we're not good, we **shouldn't** listen to them: Hashem did that once and he won't do it again.

Elimelekh: Just because He promised not to bring a flood, doesn't mean he isn't going to destroy the world some other way. "G-d gave Noah the rainbow sign/no more water, it's the fire next time." And in fact, when Sodom gets as evil as the Flood generation, Hashem rains fire on them.

Yaakov: That's cheating! What's the point of His promise then?

Rivky: Anyway, people are always telling us that the world's going to end soon. We can't believe all of them, so how do we choose? I think we shouldn't believe any of them.

Gittel: We should listen to prophets.

Rivky: But there are no prophets nowadays! I know that Chazal said that "Prophecy was taken from the wise and given to the insane and children" – is that whom you want us to listen to?

Yaakov: We have people with ruach hakodesh; we should listen to them.

Elimelekh: People with ruach hakodesh can still make really bad mistakes, and anyway we really don't know who has it or what it means.

Shlomo: Maybe it means that we should listen to scientists. I think a lot of them are telling us that the world will become uninhabitable if we don't stop global warming.

Yaakov: But stopping global warming isn't about morality and avodas Hashem! It's about reducing our carbon footprint.

Rivky: And anyway, He promised.

Shlomo: Maybe there's a connection. Maybe a society would only go on doing things that could kill our whole species if it had completely lost control of its appetites, and so it must be a really evil society.

Yael: But we're not really one society in the world, so how could Hashem judge us all together?

Elimelekh: Why should we believe that what scientists tell us is true? Doesn't science keep changing?

Rivky: I think that's cheating. We assume that science is true in every other class in this school.

Yaakov: So let's stop doing that in the other classes too.

Elimelekh: Are we really living in a society that might be so evil that G-d would destroy us, at least if He hadn't promised not to? Didn't Rav Moshe Feinstein say that America is a "government of *chesed*"?

Yaakov: Rav Moshe was niftar many years ago, and things have gotten much worse. One of my rebbeim said that the generation of the Flood was punished because *hishchis kol basar es darko al haaretz*, meaning rampant sexual confusion – isn't that happening in America today?

Gittel: Chazal also said that Hashem spares any society that is interpersonally good, even if they're terrible at *bein adam laMakom*. I think at least America qualifies.

Yaakov: I think Hashem does judge the whole world together, as one society, for these purposes. There's something powerful in the idea that we and our worst enemies are all one moral ecosystem from Hashem's perspective.

Batsheva: Why are you so confident that America is a good society interpersonally? Almost everything I read is about African-American being killed by police, women (and men) being sexually assaulted, and enormous gaps between the rich and the poor. It may be true that we profess excellent values, but we don't live up to them.

Elimelekh: I think you need to keep America's faults in perspective. Despite everything, almost everyone in the world realizes that they would prefer to live here if they made a purely rational decision.

Batsheva: Yes, but maybe that's just because we're so rich. If we were a poor country, would people feel the same way?

Shlomo: You're assuming that virtue and success are unrelated. Maybe we're so rich *because* we're so good.

Gittel: Doesn't Kohelet tell us that virtue and success are unrelated?

Shlomo: I didn't mean that Hashem rewards us. I meant that our society gives people the freedom to be creative and the ambition to live well, and that's a recipe for national wealth.

Batsheva: Part of the message of Kohelet is that it often takes a long time for the economic effects of virtue or vice to wear off. We might be rich because our grandparents constructed a virtuous society, even though our society is totally corrupt.

Yaakov: Maybe Hashem judges individuals "ba'asher hu sham", as they are now, but judges societies on the basis of their potential. He only brought the flood when there was no hope that anything worthwhile would ever emerge from that society. Does America still have the potential for moral greatness?

Gittel: I think it would be enough for Hashem if the Jewish people were virtuous or had the potential for moral greatness. But I don't see us being better or worse than anyone else.

Yael: It's very hard to compare societies. But I find it difficult to believe that the world today is worse morally than it was in the 1940s, or in the nineteenth century. So I really don't think it makes sense to say that we're under threat of G-d destroying the world today.

Elimelekh: The whole North Korea situation has really scared me, and I've read a lot about the Cold War, when many people thought nuclear war was inevitable. Maybe we're always under threat of G-d destroying the world:

Shlomo: But why should we be? If we're better than the worst ever, there shouldn't be a threat.

Rivky: Rambam says that every Jew should imagine every year that the whole world's survival depends on whether their next choice is for good or evil. Maybe the possibility of the world being destroyed tomorrow is necessary to make us take our free will seriously.

Teacher: So, last round. What's your one sentence takeaway from Parshat Noach?

Batsheva: Societies should always consider whether they are badly overestimating themselves.

Elimelekh: Existence is always fragile. We survive only while Hashem Wills us to.

Gittel: There really isn't any excuse for being evil if you believe in Hashem.

Rivky: We should act as if the world depends on us, but really G-d will be merciful anyway.

Shlomo: Human beings and animals have the same end, but if we're good, maybe Hashem will know our names.

Yaakov: The world is an ark, and we are all on it together, whether we like it or not.

Yael: Humanity is too diverse and complex for Hashem ever to find us completely valueless.

Teacher: Thank you very much for your serious participation. I think this was a powerful discussion: I learned a lot about the parshah, and about you. I hope you'll share this discussion with your parents and your shuls. Shabbat shalom!

(Please note: This dialogue is a work of fiction. No actual students were stimulated to think in the course of its preparation, but I would be encouraged if it resembled actual classrooms. Do you agree?)