

# TWO BY TWO THEY CAME TO NOAH

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In the Book of Genesis (7:9), we read: “Two by two they came to Noah into the ark, male and female, as God commanded Noah.”

Why two by two?

Noah’s task was to save and preserve all forms of life on earth. He couldn’t do this alone, of course. According to Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105), “Noah needed [God’s] support to uphold him [in righteousness].” Like Noah, we too are called to preserve all forms of life on earth. And like him, we cannot do it alone.

Regarding the words in the verse, “they came to Noah”: The hand of God, guiding all life to the ark, was joined to the hand of Noah, so in fact the task was not his alone. In effect, by using his free will to do the will of God, Noah’s actions were certain to be in harmony with the rest of God’s creation, so in that sense Noah had God’s help. Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) put it this way: “the word of God which administers nature . . . [was] the same which gave His law to Man to be observed by his own free will. . . .”

Noah was to build on earth, according to God’s design, the means to save humankind from corruption and violence. We too are charged—by virtue of the gifts and capacities that have been given to us, and by the needs of others around us—to build on earth the means of achieving God’s purpose of human redemption.

But how are we to know what to do?

Some people opine that we only have to “do good,” that we need only rely on our common sense of what is morally right and wrong. But Judaism teaches that from one time and place to another, fad and fashion inevitably dictate changing social and cultural beliefs that influence our ideas of right and wrong, so that morality is often sacrificed to greed, convenience, or cowardice.

How did Noah know how to be righteous in his time, which was one of such terrible corruption and violence that God destroyed virtually all life on earth? Our tradition teaches that Noah was given a book of wisdom, which he took with him on the ark and later passed down to Shem, his son. Shem in turn passed it to Abraham, and from him it descended through Jacob, Levy, Moses, and Joshua to Solomon, “who learned all his wisdom from it.” We too are given books of wisdom, revealing to us the means of achieving God’s purpose.

The verse we’re considering includes the words “male and female.” Both sexes would be necessary to repopulate and recreate the world. In Genesis 2:18 we read, “The Lord God said: ‘it is not good for man to be alone, I will make [for] him an *ezer k’negdo*’”—“a helper for him.”

The difficulty in understanding this term arises because, although the word *ezer* certainly has to do with “help,” *k’negdo* appears in the Bible in only one other place. But a decade or so ago a new, scholarly explanation for *k’negdo* was suggested on the basis of the related word *k’neged*, which appears in rabbinic literature and means “equal to.” Based on this usage, we should probably translate *ezer k’negdo* as “a helper *equal* to him.” On the other hand, *ezer* does not have the meaning of an *ozeret*, a maid in modern Hebrew, but rather a helper who is on a *higher* plane than the person being helped. The lesson, then, is that we must share the task with a life-partner, a helper who is in some respects on a higher plane than we are, and we must be prepared to be such a helper ourselves to our partner.

Our verse says, “God commanded Noah.” Although Noah doubted and delayed until the waters rose, he eventually bent his heart and mind to God’s will. Often we mistakenly characterize ourselves as morally unfit, forsaking our capacity for goodness, because our first reaction when faced with a difficult choice is less than admirable. Judaism teaches that what is important is not our first *thought* or *feeling* when challenged morally, but the *action* we choose. Suppose you’re sitting on a bus, a pregnant woman boards the buss, and there aren’t any available seats. Your first reaction is selfish—you don’t want to give up your seat and stand. But after a minute or two of wrestling with your conscience, you offer your seat to the woman. We are not defined by the fact that we resist, even resent, the burden of God’s commandments. We are, instead, defined by the choices we make and the actions we take.

What, then, are the lessons for us in this simple verse? Like Noah *we* are called to create the means to realize God’s will of preserving all life on earth. We don’t do it alone or based simply on our common sense of what’s right and wrong, but with others based on study of sacred texts that are full of ancient wisdom. And what matters is not what we think or feel initially, but what we choose to do.

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