

Drash on Parashat Noach
by
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Last week, the Rabbi focused on one phrase in parashat B'reishit. That verse was Genesis 3:21 and has the following translation from the JPS Torah commentary by Nachum Sarna. "And the Lord made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them."

Rabbi Netter focused particularly on the Hebrew word "Vayalbishem" and translated it as He dressed them. His interpretation of this verse was that despite their transgression and punishment, Adam and Eve are not wholly alienated from God, who now displays His parental concern for their welfare. God restores human dignity by providing clothing. Also, the garments will afford protection against the harsh conditions of life they are to encounter outside Eden. The Rabbi concluded with the ideas that God's chesed or kindness and compassion would be necessary to sustain the evils of wars, disease, holocausts, and persistent hatred of humans against humanity that would follow after Gan Eden and which will persist until the Messianic Age.

But what was not emphasized and which leads into this morning's drash is that humanity after the fall from grace in the Garden, continues rapidly to decay so that in B'reishit 4:8, we have the first fratricide.

We must now advance to the end of parashat B'reishit before we proceed to Parashat Noach.

In Genesis 6:5, the text states the following: "The Lord (and this is the tetragrammaton, or the God of mercy) saw how great was man's wickedness on Earth and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The Lord said "I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created, men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them."

But the last sentence of Parashat B'reishit (Gen. 6:8) "But Noah found favor with the Lord.

As Sarna suggests, by the tenth generation after Adam, human evil has reached the ultimate depths. The moral pollution is so great that the limits of divine tolerance have been breached. The world must be purged of its corruption.

The parasha for today is Noah. Very succinctly, the flood is a cosmic catastrophe that is actually the undoing of creation. But God's chastisement and grace operate simultaneously, so that out of the disaster comes renewal. Noah, together with his

family and representative animals and birds are to be saved in order to regenerate the world.

The action progresses in four stages. Noah receives detailed instructions from God as to how to ensure his survival and carries these out to the letter (6:9-22). Then the Flood is unleashed with all its intended devastation (chap. 7). Third, the Flood comes to its appointed end (8:1-14). Finally, the harmony between God and humanity is restored and the reordering of the world is decreed (8:15-9:17).

But this is not Drash. It is a Biblical summary of the events that occurred after Adam and Eve were banished from Eden.

Just before we were blessed to have our present Rabbi, I remember Rabbi Conn discussing this parasha by asking the congregation whom we felt was greater, Noah, Abraham, or Moses. It is interesting that I recall a well known member of our congregation declared quite energetically "Noah".

So let us discuss the Jewish Bible and ask who (and remember we are only and specifically discussing Noah and Abraham in the time periods that they lived), Who would we consider the greater. And most importantly what do we learn from this comparison and how does it affect the way we live and act as Jews today. That is Drash. Because the function of Drash is to read the text and fill in the blanks and search for the meaning of the text as the Rabbis of the Talmud did.

The Talmud discusses Noah and his generation. That Noah was righteous only in his generation. The Midrash Tanchuma (circa 370 CE) discusses the differences between Noah and Abraham. B'reshit Rabba discusses the difference between Noah, Abraham, Moses and Samuel. Finally the Zohar compares Noah to Abraham, Moses, and King David and the Moshiach. For today, let us compare only Noah with Avraham.

Parashat Noah begins by describing Noah with two words which are not used for Abraham or for Moshe. He is a tzadik and is an Ish Tam. Noah is one of the most tantalizing figures in all of Torah, and nowhere is this more evident than in the first and last glimpses we catch of him in the parashah that bears his name. The opening is full of expectation. "Noah was a righteous man, faultless in his generation. Noah walked WITH God (Hitalech et HaElohim)" (6:9). No one else in the Torah receives, such accolades, not Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or Moses, or Joshua. Only Enoch - B'reshit 5:22 states that Enoch walked with God.

Yet the last scene of Noah's life is full of pathos. "Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Yefeth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backwards and covered their father's nakedness. Their

faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father's nakedness. (9:20-23). The decorousness of Shem and Yefeth's behavior cannot hide from us the embarrassment they felt at knowing that their father –the sole human being worthy of rescue during the Flood –had become debased. How had a man so great fallen so low? That is the question to which the sages of the Midrash sought an answer, and since Midrash plays a major role in interpreting Torah, it is worth explaining here.

Midrash takes with absolute seriousness the idea that the Torah, as the word of God, who is beyond time, has a message for every time and each generation. Midrash is rarely simple or literal; it is often daring and radical.

There are many Midrashic comments on Noah and his place in the history of faith. To understand the Midrash, one must read carefully the story of the Flood. The story begins rapidly; God announces the imminent destruction of life on earth. He orders Noah to build an ark, specifying its precise measurements. Details follow as to what Noah is to take with him - his family, two (or in the case of pure animals, seven) of all the species of life, and provisions.

The rain comes; the earth is flooded; Noah and those with him are the sole survivors. The rain ceases and the water abates.

We expect to read next that Noah emerges. Instead the narrative slows down and for 14 verses almost nothing happens. He sends out a raven, then a dove, waits seven days and sends it out again. It returns with an olive leaf. Another 7 days pass. He sends it out a third time. This time it does not return. But Noah still does not step out onto dry land. Eventually, God says, "Come out of the ark." Only then does Noah do so. The Midrash is unmistakable in its note of exasperation. When it comes to rebuilding a shattered world, you do not wait for permission.

What does Noah say to God when the decree is issued that the world is about to perish? What does he say when he is told to make an ark to save himself and his family? What does he say as the rain begins to fall? Nothing. During the whole sequence of events, Noah is not reported as saying a single word. Instead we read, four times, of his silent obedience. "Noah did everything as God had commanded him." (6:22); And Noah did all that God had commanded him." (7:5) He brought pairs of animals into the ark "as God had commanded Noah" (7:9,16). Noah is the paradigm of biblical obedience. He does as he is commanded. What his story tells us is that obedience is not enough.

This is an extraordinary phenomenon. It is reasonable to assume that in the life of faith, obedience is the highest virtue. In Judaism it is not enough. If He sought no more than mindless submission to His Divine Will, He would have created robots, machines, or genetically programmed people who responded automatically to His commands as dogs to Pavlov's bells.

God wants us to be mature, deliberative, to do His will, because we understand or we trust Him when we do not understand. He seeks from us something other and greater than obedience, namely, *responsibility*.

Intuitively, the sages understood that the hero of faith was not Noah, but Abraham. Abraham, who fought a war to rescue his nephew, who prayed for the people of the plain even though he knew they were wicked; Abraham, who challenged heaven itself in words unrivaled in the human encounter with God: "Shall the Judge of all the Earth not do justice." (18:25).

What might an Abraham have said when confronted with the possibility of a Flood? "What if there are fifty righteous people? What if there are ten? Far be it from You to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked—treating the righteous and the wicked alike." (18:24-25). Abraham would have tried to save the world. Noah only saved himself and his family. Abraham might have failed, but Noah—at least on the evidence of the text, did not even try. (To be sure there are midrashic traditions that he did try, but most prefer to accept that he did not.) Noah's end, drunk and disheveled, an embarrassment to his children—eloquently tells us that if you save yourself while doing nothing to save the world, you do not even save yourself. Noah, so the narrative seems to suggest, could not live with the guilt of survival.

In B'reshit Raba (30:10) Rabbi Yehudah eloquently summarizes the difference between Noah and Abraham. "Noah walked with God", the meaning of this phrase can be understood by a parable.

A King had two sons, one an adult and one a child. To the child, he said "walk with me", to the adult son, he said "walk before me." So it was that God said to Abraham "because you are wholehearted, walk before Me." (Hitalech liphanay (17:1)) But of Noah, the Torah says that he "walked with God," (6:9). Hitalech et HaElohim. This one preposition is the difference between a child who walks with God and a mature adult who walks before God. That is the difference between a Noah and an Abraham.

It takes courage to build a shattered world. That was the courage shown by those who fought and built the State of Israel in the years after the Holocaust. It was the same kind of courage that led the handful of survivors from East European yeshivot and Chassidic groups to reconstruct their devastated worlds of learning and piety in Israel, the United States and elsewhere. They were different kinds of people but they shared that intuitive knowledge that Noah lacked: that when it comes to rebuilding the ruins of catastrophe, you do not wait for permission. You take the risk and walk ahead. Faith is more than obedience. It is the courage to create. A final word from Lord Sacks:

The greatest word uttered by the Jewish people at the holiest moment of their history, when they met God at the mountain and became His people, was *Na'aseh*, "We will do". Judaism is a religion of doing, and what we do together is greater than any of us

could do alone. That is the challenge of leadership. Jews dared believe that together, and with heaven's help, we can change the world. Daring greatly makes us great. There is no other way.

Shabbat Shalom.