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Parashat Noach

Noah's Ark: A Story of God's Love

Noah's Ark is not a story for kids. It ends with a rainbow, and it features fuzzy creatures; but think of all the puppies doomed to a watery grave. The mythic tale seeks to explain the natural world, to ask essential questions about good and evil and the role of humankind, and to lay the foundations for the Torah's portrait of God in intimate relation with the created world.

A key feature of the story—overlooked at times but indispensible to our understanding—is God's motivation first for destroying and later for preserving the world. At the tail end of last week's Torah portion, we read: וַיַּרְא יְיָ כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם, "The Eternal saw how great was humanity's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by their mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Eternal regretted making humankind on earth, and God's heart was saddened" (Gen. 6:5-6). Indeed, it is not only humanity that has gone astray—וַתִּמָּלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס, "And the [whole] earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:11). God is surprised and distressed to see God's creatures awash in the blood of their own aggression, violating the principles of harmony and peace God expected to be maintained forever. As Rashi explains, "God mourned at the failure of the work of God's hand" (Rashi on Gen. 6:6).

God cannot abide the proliferation of wickedness and resolves to put an end to it. "But," we read, "Noah found favor with the Eternal. … He was a righteous man, blameless in his age" (Gen. 6:8-9). Noah was a reminder to God, even in the midst of intolerable violence, that there could still be some goodness in the world. So instead of wiping away all of Creation, God decides to start again, assigning Noah as a caretaker for a pair[1] of each of the world's animals and drowning the rest.

Eventually, the rains subside, the dove finds dry land, and Noah and the animals disembark. God observes the survivors, accepts Noah's offering of thanksgiving, and vows inwardly, "Never again will I doom the earth because of humankind, since the devisings of the human mind are evil from their youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done" (Gen. 8:21). Before, God sent the Flood because "humanity's wickedness on earth was so great." And now, God sees the same thing—"the devisings of the human mind are evil from their youth"—and draws a completely different conclusion. Human nature first prompts God's anger but later stirs God's mercy.

We can see in this progression a transformation of the character of God. God learns from God's mistakes, not only the mistakes of creation but also of God's own

[1] In Gen. 6:19, God instructs Noah, "Of all that lives, of all flesh, you shall take two of each into the ark." Five verses later, God instructs Noah, "Of every clean animal you shall take seven pairs, males and their mates, and of every animal that is not clean, two, a male and its mate" (Gen. 7:2). This second account is necessary for enabling Noah to offer sacrifices in Gen. 8:20, prompting God's promise never again to destroy the earth. (See below.)

emotional response. The story of the Flood might be seen as one of fury and woe, an example of the classic canard of "The Old Testament God of Vengeance." But really it's a romance, a story of God falling in love with humanity and determining not *in spite* of our flaws but *because* of them to remain steadfast and committed to an ongoing relationship with the world.

What's more, this story might be seen as theological laziness, an anthropomorphic fantasy of an impressionable and overreactive deity whose promises should be taken with a pillar-sized grain of salt. But the better reading is to recognize the divine modeling we can incorporate into our own lives. How often is our temper piqued by an infuriating trigger, or how often do we regret the results of a decision we thought would work out better? We can't erase these moments, pretending as if we always kept our cool or overlooking the catastrophes caused by our own ignorance or shortsightedness. Rather, like the Torah's depiction of God, we can learn from our mistakes, see the same world in a different light, grow in compassion and sensitivity so that we can renew our commitments to the objects of our love. A fundamental takeaway from the story of Noah's Ark is that God makes the conscious choice to suppress divine fury, to cultivate understanding and compassion, and to stay in steady relationship with the world.

Stories about God are stories about ourselves. And as mythical and magical as tales like this one are, they'd be even more unbelievable if they portrayed the Creator or its world as anything but flawed. A God who changes and improves, who is affected by the objects of divine affection, and who makes decisions—sometimes painful though ultimately motivated by love—is a God who inspires us to be more than we are today; who demonstrates the values of reflection and reconsideration, repentance and respect; and who inspires us not to give up on ourselves or one another. Though evil may seem insuperable, though violence proliferates across the globe and human weakness threatens the very safety of the earth, we can never lose sight of the possibility of regrowth. The bow in the sky is a reminder to God never again to destroy the world, and it also serves as a reminder to us who see it that we are worthy of keeping around.

It's not a free pass to do what we want, of course. God's recommitment to the earth comes with expectations, understood by the Rabbis as seven basic laws incumbent on all humanity. The "Noahide Laws," as they are called, include the establishment of courts and prohibitions against murder and theft.[2] And they are also reminders that we can meet God halfway. Just as God grows, so too can we; God's improvements spur our own, and we seek ever to strengthen the hold of morality and law.

The promise is two-way. God will stick with us so long as we strive to do what's right. So may we hold one another in the sacred embrace of accountability and love. May we commit to seeing one another with compassion and grace. And may we hold in our hearts the symbols of the rainbow and the ark, reminders in a world awash with pain of the everlasting power of hope.

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[2] Tosefta Avodah Zarah [Foreign Worship] 9:4 and BT Sanhedrin 56a.