

D'var Torah/sermon for Parshat Noach

“We come to love not by finding a perfect person, but by learning to see an imperfect person perfectly”, Sam Keen

In some ways *Parshat Noach* is like a love story; first between God and all of humankind and ultimately between God and the Jewish people.

Here's the plot: Since the time of Adam and Eve, 10 generations prior to Noah, all of humankind had become completely morally corrupt. Seeing that, God said to Godself: “I will blot out humankind, from man to beast, to crawling things and to the fowl of the heavens...” (6:7)

Here is some of the back story: Midrash tells us that, God had *already completely* destroyed previous worlds. God blessed humankind with free will but has not yet come to terms with the fact that, with regularity, humankind exercises the tendency to misuse it! But God's learning curve in love relationships, is going in the right direction. In the words of Sam Keen, American author, professor and philosopher: “We come to love not by finding a perfect person, but by learning to see an imperfect person perfectly.” In the face of universal corruption, God decided *not* to completely destroy the world, but to save Noah, who was found to be righteous in his time. God would recreate humankind from him.

The plot thickens: God *told* Noah that God would bring a catastrophic flood that would destroy all life on earth. God gave Noah specific instructions first, about how to build the ark and then about who would come on it. The Torah tells us: “Noah did ...; just as God commanded him, so he did.” (6:23)

Noah was obedient. “Just as God commanded him, so he did.” But we know from our study of the Akedah on Rosh Hashana, that obedience is *not* always what God wants from us. I quote myself: “God wants us to pay attention, to be present, and

to bring the fullness of ourselves into *all* our relationships.” In *Parshat Noach*, there is evidence that is what God asks of Godself, as well.

Before I started doing research for this d’var Torah, I considered the God in the Noah story to be petulant and immature. Like a spoiled child, God didn’t like what was happening with God’s creation and decided to destroy it and start again. But in fact, there are words beginning with Adam and Eve, *even before* the Noah story, indicating that these are *not* the stories of a capricious God. In fact, we will see that God is remarkably receptive to changing God’s perspective of human nature. God learns to see imperfect humans perfectly, concedes to human imperfections and maintains an unfaltering love.

There is a general understanding in the Bible, that rebellion against or disobedience of God and God’s laws, will end in expulsion or banishment. This is true in all of the five books of Moses. The *element of free will, of choice* has always been a complicating factor in human existence. But even when our choices displease God, God never completely abandons us.

You may have heard the story of a person stuck on his rooftop in a flood. He was praying to God for help.

Soon a man in a rowboat came by. He shouted to the man on the roof, "Jump in, I can save you."

The stranded person shouted back, "No, it's OK, I'm praying to God who is going to save me."

So, the rowboat went on.

Then a motorboat came by. "The person in the motorboat shouted, "Jump in, I can save you."

The stranded man said, "No thanks, I'm praying to God who is going to save me. I have faith."

So, the motorboat went on.

Then a helicopter came by and the pilot shouted, "Grab this rope and I will lift you to safety."

The stranded man again replied, "No thanks, I'm praying to God who is going to save me. I have faith."

So, the helicopter reluctantly, flew away.

Soon the water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned. He went to Heaven where he got his chance to discuss the situation with God. "I had faith in you but you didn't save me, you let me drown," he cried. "I don't understand why!"

"I sent you a rowboat, a motorboat and a helicopter. What more did you expect?" God replied.

The man, I presume, was waiting for God to perform some kind of a miracle. But, as we have learned, it is the goodness, the Divine spark in each of us, through which God's presence is felt on earth.

The story of Noah shows us a compassionate and caring God. "Now, YHWH saw that great was humankind's evildoing on earth...[God] was sorry that [God] had made humankind on earth, and it pained [God's] heart." (6:5-6)

When the rain began, Noah was saved not by his own merit but by the will of a caring God. The ark was all loaded up and lovingly, God shut [Noah] in to be saved.

The flood waters receded. The earth needed to be repopulated and the ills that had brought the flood, needed to be remedied. God had the opportunity, in effect, to do teshuva and to reassure a fearful Noah, that the cataclysm of the flood, would not

be repeated. By means of blessings and a covenant, God did exactly that. “Never again ... will I ... destroy every living being, as I have done.” (8:21) “God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fertile and multiply and fill the earth’... (9:1) God set the sign of a rainbow for a covenant between Humankind and God and between God and the earth. And God said, “When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will see it and *remember* the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures.” (9:13-16) When God “remembers”, is not the retention or recollection of words or a mental image. For God to “remember” in Torah, means God will focus on the object of memory so that *actions result*.”¹ When God “remembers” support in some form, will follow.

Before the flood, humankind was vegetarian; allowed to eat only from trees and plants that grow in the earth. But we see that God has come to love not by finding a perfect [people], but by learning to see imperfect people, perfectly. You will be interested to know, that in the post-flood blessings, God gave humankind the ability to eat meat. “All things crawling about that live, for you shall they be for eating, as with the green plants, I now give you all. However, flesh with its life, its blood, you are not to eat!” (9:3-4) There must *always* be an accounting for willful bloodshed...for in God’s image, God made [humankind].” (9:6)

Finally, after the flood, our loving and compassionate God, *chooses* to restrain God’s own ability to radically disturb the processes of nature.”² “All flesh shall *never* be cut off again by waters of the Deluge, *never again* shall there [even] *be* a deluge.”

¹ JPS Bereshit, p. 56

² Fox, p. 40

So, there you have it. I was wrong about God and I have learned, yet again, the value of taking seriously the mitzvah to read and re-read the Torah, turning it over and over again, always to discover something new and valuable.

While preparing for this d'var Torah I found other tidbits that gave me a feeling of pride in Judaism. Ours is not the only story of a cataclysmic flood in Mesopotamia, particularly during the time period and geographic area of the Noah story. There is archaeological evidence of periodic inundation of flood waters in the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. So, it is not surprising that flood stories are common. What is noteworthy is that while there are many parallels between the biblical account and others, the Genesis story is unique in three ways. First, it is a turning point in the history of humankind in which there is a divine decision to save the "hero". In most other Mesopotamian stories of a flood, the world was completely wiped out. If a hero was saved, it was inadvertent, often the result of subterfuge of one of the gods against another. Second, The Genesis flood was God's response to *the moral corruption* of humankind. Noah was chosen to survive because of his moral integrity. In other flood stories, if there were any men, literally men, saved, it was because they were of royal blood. In those stories people were wiped out for reasons as silly as mankind's noise disturbing the sleep of the gods. Finally, a major difference in the Torah story is that only Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives, entered the ark. In other accounts, the builders of the vessel, the boatmen, relatives and friends, were passengers along with the hero and his family. The Noah story tells about a covenant between one family and God, but a covenant that was applicable universally. With the introduction, next week, of the patriarchal narratives, the Torah turns to the *particular history* of

the Jewish people and to God's ongoing struggle to understand and love them *perfectly*, despite that they are consistently imperfect.

There is a story of a farmer who had some puppies he needed to sell. He painted a sign advertising the pups and began to nail it to a post on the edge of his yard.

As he was driving the last nail into the post, he felt a tug on his overalls.

He looked down into the eyes of a little boy.

"Mister," he said, "I want to buy one of your puppies."

"Well," said the farmer, as he rubbed the sweat off the back of his neck, "these puppies come from fine parents and cost a good deal of money."

The boy dropped his head for a moment. Then reaching deep into his pocket, he pulled out a handful of change and held it up to the farmer. "I've got thirty-nine cents. Is that enough to take a look?"

"Sure," said the farmer. And with that he let out a whistle. "Here Dolly!" he called.

Out from the doghouse and down a ramp ran Dolly, followed by four little balls of fur.

The little boy pressed his face against the chain link fence. His eyes danced with delight.

As the dogs made their way to the fence, the little boy noticed something else stirring inside the doghouse.

Slowly another little ball appeared, this one noticeably smaller.

Down the ramp it slid. Then in an awkward manner, the little pup began hobbling toward the others, doing its best to catch up....

"I want that one," the little boy said, pointing to the runt.

The farmer knelt down at the boy's side and said, "Son, you don't want that puppy. He will never be able to run and play with you like these other dogs would."

With that the little boy stepped back from the fence, reached down, and began to roll up one leg of his trousers. In doing so he revealed a steel brace running down both sides of his leg attaching itself to a specially made shoe.

Looking back up at the farmer, he said, “You see sir, I don’t run too well myself, and he will need someone who understands.”

With tears in his eyes, the farmer reached down and picked up the little pup. Holding it carefully he handed it to the little boy.

“How much?” asked the little boy.

“No charge,” answered the farmer, “There’s no charge for love.”

My maternal grandfather taught me a song when I was very young. I, in turn, taught it to our children. If it came with a tune, I don’t remember it, but I’ll never forget the words. “Love is something when you give it away, you end up having more.” *Parshat Noach* has given us the blessing of coming to love not by finding a perfect person, but by learning to see an imperfect person perfectly.

So may it be.