

Sermon – NOAH – Friday, October 23

This week's Torah parsha Noah has, of course, as its dominant theme the remarkable story of Noah, that quiet man tasked to build an Ark in order to repopulate the world that God was about to destroy and the 40-day flood that followed. But before and after this story, we also discover two of our earliest world civilizations, one before the Great Flood and the one after. And this is where my focus will be this evening.

The story is not pretty on either side of the Great Flood. As the parsha opens, we are many generations after the first humans and we read about what the world had become. Certainly, the stories of Adam and Eve and of Cain and Abel gave us clear signals that we don't play particularly well within families or for that matter with other people, but in parshat Noah, we are introduced to a world that is outright horrific.

We don't get much detail, but what we are told is definitely not good: the earth was corrupt, the flesh was corrupted and the earth was "full of robbery." Huge images here, not just of all flesh (I'm guessing people) being corrupted but the very earth itself corrupted, leaving us to imagine the chaos, the depravity, the depths to which God's creations had sunk. Clearly, any idea of social contracts or community did not exist, and the situation was so dire, so far gone that God decided to wipe out the entire population of the world with the exception of Noah and his family. It took a 40-day flood to scour every human and even the earth, for a chance for a new start.

The world is of course, rebuilt differently, with Noah and his sons undoubtedly passing on the stories of the world before, the stories of God's intervention and clear directions on how to choose a better way of life. And it turns out that we had changed in hugely positive ways.

Many generations go by post-Flood, and we now read of a world, one as different as night and day from the world before: This time we read that “the entire earth was of one language and uniform words.” They travelled and found a valley where they settled peacefully. This is quite the story – in a land with no Ten Commandments, no leaders and prophets, human beings seemed to have the capacity to live comfortably in community, and we were seemingly in the Age of Aquarius, peace, unity, harmony, and collegiality, pretty much as God’s children. Darkness, robbery and corruption were now far in the past. And then, in the midst of all that peaceful co-existence, a joint plan was hatched: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered upon the face of the entire earth.”

Somehow, too much of a good thing, too much complacency, too much patting each other on the back. We had become masters of all around us, and we were filled with hubris, we owned everything, we had forgotten that God had given us absolutely everything. And in response, we read that God stepped in, by disrupting their unity of purpose, by introducing multiple languages. Not only did construction of the tower stop as a result, but they were no longer able to live together peacefully in that valley, and so they were scattered around the world.

At least, we weren’t destroyed this time around. But there are lessons that our biblical scholars wanted us to learn here too --that too much individuality, too much self is a problem. Too much uniformity, sameness, too much community-mindedness is also a problem. As we look at those two civilizations, one bowl of porridge was too cold, one was too hot and no, we were weren’t given the third bowl that was just right. Instead we were dispersed around the world, each of us with our own unique languages and perceptions and feelings, and we have been challenged to find our own unique bowls.

It occurred to me as I was writing this dvar that our dispersal was not a punishment, but rather an opportunity, something that was necessary in our evolution as a species. Complacency and boredom in the Garden of Eden tempted us individually to taste from the Tree of Knowledge. And similarly, too much

peacefulness and uniformity as a community inevitably forced us to break out, not outwards in this story but instead, upwards.

For this is what God created – humans who yearn for differences and change, all enhanced by “multiple languages” – the very condition that lets us grow, change and adapt, to evolve – because in our understandings and misunderstandings with each other, we ask more questions, strive more, think more, create more. And in those struggles, in the grand scheme, we inevitably move forward.

So it is, that the pre-Flood world and the world of Babel offered us black and white extremes, which we found to be wanting. And we discovered that we needed and need to live in shades of gray. Over the course of our history, we have experienced a pendulum swinging hard from one end to the other, now moving back again, wobbling in one direction then the next, always moving, never still – its constant movement teaching us humility, awareness, fear and love.

Pluralism has become our way over the eons, as humans and as Jews – multiple mindsets and viewpoints, unique individuals forming and reforming into a kaleidoscope of different communities, whether it be family, social or religious. Yet it is these tensions that lead us to creativity, brilliant writing and music and art, and unique expressions of common values. And yes, those same tensions cause some of our greatest sorrows as well: Will we tolerate and appreciate those who think and act or believe differently than me? Or will I fall victim to the perils of groupspeak and tribalism, the arrogance of the Tower of Babel, the idea that my way, my group’s way is the only true way? And will I or we act out on that arrogance in the ways of our pre-Flood world? Or will I corrupt the earth again by my actions against those who think and act differently than me?

Not surprisingly, our Reform movement offers us a clear teaching in our 1999 Pittsburgh Principles on how we are to live and act in this grey world.

We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God’s creation. Partners

with God in תיקון עולם (*tikkun olam*), repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue צדקה (*tzedek*), justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth's biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice.

May these words be our guides. Ken Yehi Ratzon. May it be God's will.