

Noah 5768
Polar Bears

Shabbat Shalom.

A week ago Thursday, Shemini Atzeret, my 6-year old daughter Talya came running in with a concerned question. She said, “Abba, Abba, what’s going to happen to the polar bears?”

I replied, “What do you mean?”

She said, “Well, look at this picture,” and she held up Tuesday’s *Science Times* with a picture of a polar bear floating on a small piece of ice. Apparently someone had told her that because of global warming the polar ice caps are melting at an accelerated pace and there would not be as much terrain for polar bears to roam.

Talya continued: “What can we do, Abba?”

The truth was that I didn’t know how to respond to Talya. I experienced different emotions. First, a sense of outrage at what has happened to our environment already, not to mention the future projections of what will continue to happen, based on the amount of carbon emissions that we as human beings produce. My outrage stems from the fact that it does not seem as if our politicians are doing enough to stop this. In fact, some of their decisions seem to make the situation worse. In addition, it boggles my mind that we cannot build more efficient cars and more efficient homes and businesses that will move us in a better direction. My wife Sharon just rented the powerful movie *An Inconvenient Truth* by Al Gore, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work about the environment.

My second feeling was a sense of frustration. What can we do? It’s probably too late. Even if it isn’t too late, will we really be able to change anything? I almost felt like telling Talya that it is just sad. I don’t think there will be as many polar bears in the world.

One silver lining did pop into my mind. Perhaps if the polar ice caps all melt and the temperature rises, some of our friends and relatives will return from Florida, which will now be uninhabitable. But aside from that, I felt a struggle to define what we can do in the face of this situation.

The flood also reminded me, of course, of this week’s Torah reading, Parashat Noah. In it, most of the life in the world is destroyed by an overwhelming flood. If one digs a little bit closer in the text, you can see the Torah’s magnificent picture of both the destruction of the world in this morning’s parashah and the creation of the world in last week’s reading.

Last Shabbat, we read: “On the third day of creation, God says, ‘Let the Earth sprout vegetation, seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with seeds in it,’ and it was so.”

On the fifth day, God speaks, and swarms of living creatures and birds that fly above the earth are created, and on the sixth day God creates wild beasts, creeping things, and finally human beings.

Let’s juxtapose last week’s reading of the creation of the world with what we read this morning. In chapter 7, the Torah states that the waters swelled above the earth, so high that even the highest mountains under the sky were covered.

Then: “All existence on earth was blotted out – man, cattle, creeping things, and birds of the sky. They were blotted out from the earth.” Notice how the Torah, ever so subtly, reverses the order of what is created. What was created last is destroyed first. First human beings, then the cattle, then the creeping things, and then the birds in the sky are blotted out.

It is an un-creation – a reversal of what took place when God created the world. Why? Why does the Torah frame things this way?

It seems that the text wants to demonstrate that this was purposeful. God created the world with purpose. God evaluated the creation and saw that it was good, and then God continued to evaluate the world, and when the things that grew upon the earth were no longer good, God made a change.

One of the striking questions of this parashah is - why does God do it? Why does God create a world that can become imperfect and then destroy it?

If God is perfect, then why would God set up a dynamic that is inherently flawed? On a certain level, it makes no sense. If God wanted to create the world, why would God do it incorrectly? It’s as if God made a mistake.

Perhaps that is one of the messages. That God can make mistakes. That somehow in the initial creation of the world, the evil potential was too strong. As God created the world, each day it states that it was *tov*, and it was good. On the third day God said that it was good twice, which is why there is sometimes the custom for Jews to get married on Monday night or Tuesday, because it is a day doubly blessed with goodness, a fortuitous moment to get married.

But after all that goodness, culminating with the creation of human kind, where God said that it was *tov meod* - very good - things changed by the end of last week’s parashat. So much so that the text states: “*VaYare Adonai kee rabah ra’at ha-adam ba-aretz* – God saw how great was humankind’s wickedness on

earth and how every plan devised by their minds was nothing but evil all the time.”

Tov, has become ra. Good has become evil. Perhaps it was the sin of Adam and Eve that started this decline. Perhaps it was Cain’s killing his brother Abel. Perhaps it was a general deterioration of the moral fiber of the society. But however it transpired, the end is clear. God judges his works and deems them lacking.

We too can learn a lesson here. While we might not want to sweep away all life as a way to learn the lesson, we can understand that we make mistakes. God can make mistakes.

Alternatively, maybe the destruction was the mistake. Though clearly not the simple reading of the text, we may look at this parashah and feel that it is not a model to emulate. It is far too extreme. This is not how we should act when we make a mistake.

While that is not the traditional reading of this narrative, there is a hint. At the end of the parashah, God promises never to destroy the world again, designating the *keshet*, the rainbow as an eternal reminder of this. It is as if God is acknowledging that wiping out the world was not the best idea and resolves not to do it again.

I think most of us would agree that today, sadly, humans more likely to destroy the world than God is.

But there is another more powerful lesson here. The point of un-creating creation deliberately, purposefully, is that we should never feel complacent. We should understand that the world and we are always in a state of brokenness. Perhaps there are different degrees. But that should inspire us to do tikkun.

Think about it – God does not give up on the world, even as his works go awry. God reengages with the world. God does not desert the world – this is a model for us.

We can and should question the way that God performs this tikkun – destroying almost all life, but nonetheless the end result is very clear. If things are evaluated and deemed to be flawed, to be corrupt, then just as God does, we must perform tikkun - repair and renewal.

This morning’s parashat is the first act of tikkun of fixing, of repairing something, of looking at something, seeing that it is broken and figuring out how to renew it. God models for us that we should look at everything we create and everything that we do in the world and evaluate it. As the Torah states, “Va-Yar

Adonai – God saw.” God evaluated. God judged. God deemed. God assessed the situation. We need to do the same.

Now there are many things that need repair in our world, such as improving aspects of ourselves, working on our own families and our relationships with friends, nurturing our community and strengthening it, healing and helping those in need, comforting the afflicted and producing a more just, more civil, and more peaceful world. We could look at all the problems and throw our hands up and say, “What could we possibly do.”

There may not be that much that we can do.

But the Torah reminds us: don’t disengage from the world. While we may disagree with the some of the results of God’s actions, God never leaves the world to mire in its own chaos. We must look at a situation and figure out what we can do. We may not be able to un-create all the world’s problems as God does so dramatically, but God teaches us to do what we can. For us as humans, we should start small. If we cannot change everything, then change one thing. Each of us can find an area to improve ourselves and our families and our communities and the world.

I’ll take you back to my conversation with Talya. After thinking for a while, I decided that there was little that we could do except do our best to conserve. We have already changed over most of our light bulbs to compact fluorescent bulbs. We try to walk instead of using our car, well, at least every Shabbat, and we are looking for other ways to cut down our energy consumption. We will support parties, candidates, and organizations that make conservation a priority.

But Talya and I also thought of something even more concrete and simple that we can do: recycle more. Talya has already learned in her school “shmirat adamah,” taking care of the environment, and so she and I will become a little more diligent in making sure that we recycle every piece of paper and cardboard, packaging material, plastics, and any other possible items. We can do just a little bit more to help the world.

That’s our small act of tikkun. It may not save every polar bear, but it reminds us that we are partners with God in performing tikkun.

As Sara reminded us in our dvar Torah, Noah after the flood is given responsibilities, not only to fill the earth, but Noah is given charge over every creature. That doesn’t mean that we cannot benefit from the rest of the planet and the creatures that are in it, but we are given regulations and rules in order to be stewards. Together, we can help to repair the world, perhaps even helping a polar bear along the way.

Shabbat shalom.