

Noah 5772 - Reworking the Past
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

It's quite something to have a full week without holidays after our extended experience of the first month on the Jewish calendar. It was a lot of fun, but it's also good when it comes to a close. As we read in last week's *parashah*, even God likes to work for six days!

There had been a lot going on: high holy days, sermon writing, blowing shofar at hospitals, building a *sukkah* and planning all kinds of events.

Since my wife, Sharon, and I wanted to get the New Year off to a good start and were hosting an open Sukkah party, we decided to find a solution to the clutter that inevitably builds up at the entrance to our home, especially shoes.

After researching various solutions, Sharon ordered a large wooden shoe holder and bench combo on-line. The first bench was mis-delivered to a neighbor's address and was destroyed in a rainstorm.

The second bench arrived right before Sukkot. Though Sharon worked diligently to assemble it before the holiday, it became clear to her that the product was poorly designed and probably defective. Frustrated, we placed the shoe holder, which once held such promise but was now an eyesore, in a corner and moved on.

Our kids, however, spied the box that it was delivered in, scampered off with it, and returned with a boat. They were thrilled with their new toy, and embarked on many sea-faring adventures.

This week's *parashah* contains an even larger boat. The Torah states that it was to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high (Genesis 6:15) displacing some 43,000 tons according to our Etz Hayim Humash.

We all know the story. The people are not behaving well. Society is filled with immorality, and, in a metaphoric anthropomorphism, God throws up God's hands and says, "Oy vey! We'll have to start all over."

This is a powerful narrative; a story that every child knows and loves: the animals go onto Noah's Ark two-by-two and are saved from the waters. It's so nice that we find Noah's Arks on baby clothing and children's artwork – my son Ari has one in his room. It's very cute, very nice.

But Noah's Ark is a problematic narrative. As Jaime pointed out in her d'var Torah, what exactly does God promise?

And what does it say about punishment? On many levels, Noah is a limited tale. It does not convey messages that we really like.

Let's see what it teaches. If you are told that there is going to be a massive flood and that you should build an ark, then you probably should do it.

But other than that, the values don't resonate. What does it say about the people in that time; are they given an opportunity to change, to repent?

Imagine if you had a child who was not behaving well at all and you got fed up, and said, "That's it! I give up! I can't deal with this kid. Let's move on to another one."

Now, I know there have been a few moments when I felt a little bit like this, but this is not an appropriate parenting strategy.

We can read the Noah story in the same way, which is quite problematic. Why aren't the people afforded an opportunity for *teshuvah*, for repentance?

Just a few weeks ago on Rosh Hashanah and on the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and on Yom Kippur itself, we verbalized our belief in a serious process of introspection and self-improvement – a belief that we can change and improve.

Ours is a tradition that believes in change, but it appears nowhere in the Noah narrative.

Yet, our tradition does not end with the Torah's tales; we have thousands of years of new interpretations and ideas. The Noah story has been cited and referenced by many, including Isaiah in this morning's *haftarah*.

But I think it is the book of Jonah, which we read on Yom Kippur afternoon that utilizes some of the themes from the flood episode in the most interesting manner. It goes in a very different direction from the book of Genesis.

While we're not exactly sure when the Book of Jonah was composed, most scholars agree that it was in the Second Temple period, most likely in the fifth or fourth century BCE. The author of this text played off of some of the same ideas and forms from earlier stories in the Torah, but also makes a major change.

First, the similarities. In each text, there is a prophetic protagonist. While neither Noah nor Jonah is referred to explicitly as a prophet, both receive God's command.

Another similarity is that they both navigate perilous waters aboard a boat and both get to dry land – though one by way of a large fish!

And they both deal with doomed populations. Jonah is sent to warn the people of Nineveh that if they do not repent and change their ways, they will be destroyed and, sure enough, they do repent and they are not wiped out. Of course, all humanity except Noah and his family are destroyed.

Both texts share similar phrases and themes and both speak of a forty-day period preceding the scheduled destruction.

As one teacher of mine in Israel, Judy Klitzner, points out, both narratives have prominent doves. Noah sends forth a dove as a messenger to determine if there is dry land. Jonah's name, Yonah, means dove, and he is, in essence, the human messenger sent out to warn the people of Nineveh.

At the end of the text, each protagonist falls into a state of unconsciousness. Noah imbibes too much alcohol, and Jonah falls into a coma-like sleep.

But, of course, there are many differences. Most striking is the overall difference.

In the story of Noah, the people have no opportunity to repent. Were the people warned? Did they have any chance to change their fate? Were they given a second chance?

In the story of Jonah, the people are sent their own personal, prophetic messenger who warns them all. In fact, it appears that Jonah knows that he will be so successful in his warning that the people will repent and, therefore, his prophecy of doom will not come true, which is why he is reluctant to carry out his assignment.

The story of Jonah is really the opposite of the story of Noah. While both narratives have populations that are corrupt and have prophetic figures who travel on boats, in one, the punishment is not avoidable, but in the second, it is.

In our *parashah*, the judgment comes quickly, but in the story of Jonah, it is Jonah who is quick to judge and God who presents a more nuanced and flexible position.

In fact, the Book of Jonah closes with a question that God poses Jonah: How can you not be compassionate towards a city filled with 120,000 people? They may be sinning, they may be behaving inappropriately, but they can change. Should we not be compassionate?

While Genesis does not introduce the notion of *teshuvah*, the author of Jonah does. Here, we have a new approach. Maybe not a new idea, but an idea different from the one in the narrative of Noah: people can change and they can improve.

While ancient civilizations believed that life was a circle, that we were trapped in the endless circle of winter, spring, summer, and fall, and that we could not break out of our destiny, the Jewish tradition offered a new perspective.

Judaism utilizes a different metaphor: instead of a circle, it is a helix, and therefore, there can be movement and improvement. Although the seasons do come one after the other, year after year, we can change. We can grow and change.

This change from the Noah narrative to the story of Jonah teaches us valuable ideas. The first is the concept of *teshuvah*, of repentance. This is echoed in the rabbinic treatment of the Book of Exodus. After Moses breaks the first two tablets because of the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses carves two new tablets and declares God's thirteen attributes.

Among those attributes are that God is slow to anger, abounds in kindness and faithfulness, extends kindness to the thousandth generation, forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet God does not remit all punishment and can visit the iniquity of parents upon their children and children's children to the third and fourth generations. (Exodus 34:6-7)

These attributes describe a God who is compassionate, yet does not fully eliminate sin. There is great truth to this. We all know that actions we take can have an impact on future generations. The traumas that my grandmother experienced as a motherless child in World War I were passed down to my father and even to me.

The rabbis, however, make a bold emendation. When we recite these attributes liturgically, as we did repeatedly on the high holy days (you remember: *Adonai, Adonai, El Rahum V'Hanun Erekh Apayim V'rav Hesed...*), we leave off the phrase that God does not totally forgive, choosing instead to end it with the notion of forgiveness – boldly reversing the meaning of the text!

The second idea that the book of Jonah offers is that sometimes the best new ideas take old ideas and reshape them because of new knowledge and understanding.

As *Ahad Ha'am*, a major Zionist thinker from the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries, wrote: “The book remains un-changed forever; the content changes ceaselessly with the progress of life and culture.”

Preserving and reworking the old is vital to the new – to the future.

The author of the Book of Jonah wanted us to know that *teshuvah* is possible, that people can change. But he did it in a way that connected to the earlier narrative, building on some of the texts and ideas.

Scholars call this type of commenting by later authors in the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, intertextuality.

While some new ideas are simply introduced with no connection to what came before them, the most engaging ideas build on and re-weave the past into a new tapestry.

One could simply break away from ancient traditions, but the best kind of change in a tradition takes those ancient traditions and recasts them in a new setting. That's what Jewish movements have always done – the rabbis, Hasidism in the 1700's, and what we do.

Conservative Judaism incorporates tradition and modernity. It is never disconnected from the past, nor does it disallow innovation and new concepts. It synthesizes the two.

Just as the rabbis did in the Talmud and Midrash, we build on the ancient stories from the Torah, reinterpret them and give them new meaning.

Each successive generation of Jews looks at our classic texts such as this morning's Torah reading, *Parashat Noah*, and understands it for a new time and place.

That's what the author of Jonah did, and that's what we too must do with our traditions.

We shouldn't cut ourselves off from them, but we can remold them, bringing ancient truths and practices into this moment.

The thread may be old – but we weave a new tapestry.

Like my children, who picked up the box of the shoe holder and used it as something that was meaningful and compelling to them, we, too, each week and each year, at *b'nei mitzvah*, or when we gather to learn, can explore our tradition, making sure that it is an *Etz Hayim*, a Tree of Life, that continues to live on in all of us.

Shabbat Shalom.