

What Can We Learn From Noah's Ark?

Just over a week ago, Mike Rosenberg led us in special prayers for rain. Since it does not rain for half the year in Israel, this ancient practice must have helped our ancestors cope with their precarious position.

Well, while our prayers are mostly focused on Israel, it's clear that we must have gotten a bit carried away here, since it has barely stopped raining since we started praying for rain!



In fact, after this week's soaking storm, I found part of the roof of my sukkah floating down a small rivulet in my backyard! Yes, yes, I know, I know – I should've taken the *sukkah* down last Sunday, but I did not quite have the time. So, I am going to ask us all for a favor – if you could take down the intensity on the rain prayers just a few notches – at least just for now or until I finish taking down my *sukkah*!



This week of rain has been an appropriate segue into this week's Torah reading of *Parashat Noah* with its famous story of an ancient flood. As we were preparing our weekly video, Rabbi Fel reintroduced me to a wonderful Disney animated short about this week's Torah reading. You may have seen the clip of it he placed at the beginning of our weekly video. [Click the link below to watch this humorous eight minute video]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3mkimHFmo0&src_vid=RFIYVZc_Er4&feature=iv&annotation_id=annotation_3423639181

Entitled "Father Noah's Ark," it was produced in 1933 as part of Disney's Silly Symphonies: a collection of 75 animated short films. *Father Noah's Ark* is a most clever and whimsical treatment of this famous biblical narrative. For example, every animal gets involved in the building of the ark in this version. Monkeys are sawing logs by holding saws in their tails, a rhinoceros slices through logs with his horn in order to produce flat boards, and a snake undulates so that it can become a conveyor belt, loading provisions onto the ship. Even a hippopotamus gets in on the act, opening its large mouth and closing it to make holes through the boards so they can be nailed to the ark!

It's fun, it's fanciful, it's humorous. It's the perfect children's story!
Animals getting loaded on a boat to go on a 40 day cruise – what could be more wild and absurd than that!?!



Perhaps that's why Noah's Ark is such a popular theme for young children. Many of us had the little Fisher-Price set of Noah's Ark growing up. Anyone?

What about other Noah's Ark-themed toys? Stuffed animals in sets of two? Pictures and paintings of Noah's Ark are also pretty big. Noah's Ark has become a substantial commercial enterprise catering to young children.



What's not to like?

But if you stop and think about it, this may not be the perfect children's story!

What happens?

The world is destroyed!

Is this a story for young children?

Multitudes of innocents must have been killed; what happened to all the children?

And what of God? Is this the behavior that we want to see in our Divine? A God who decides to wipe out the entire planet? This is a highly problematic text.

What can we do with such a narrative? This portrayal of the Almighty doesn't resonate with me.

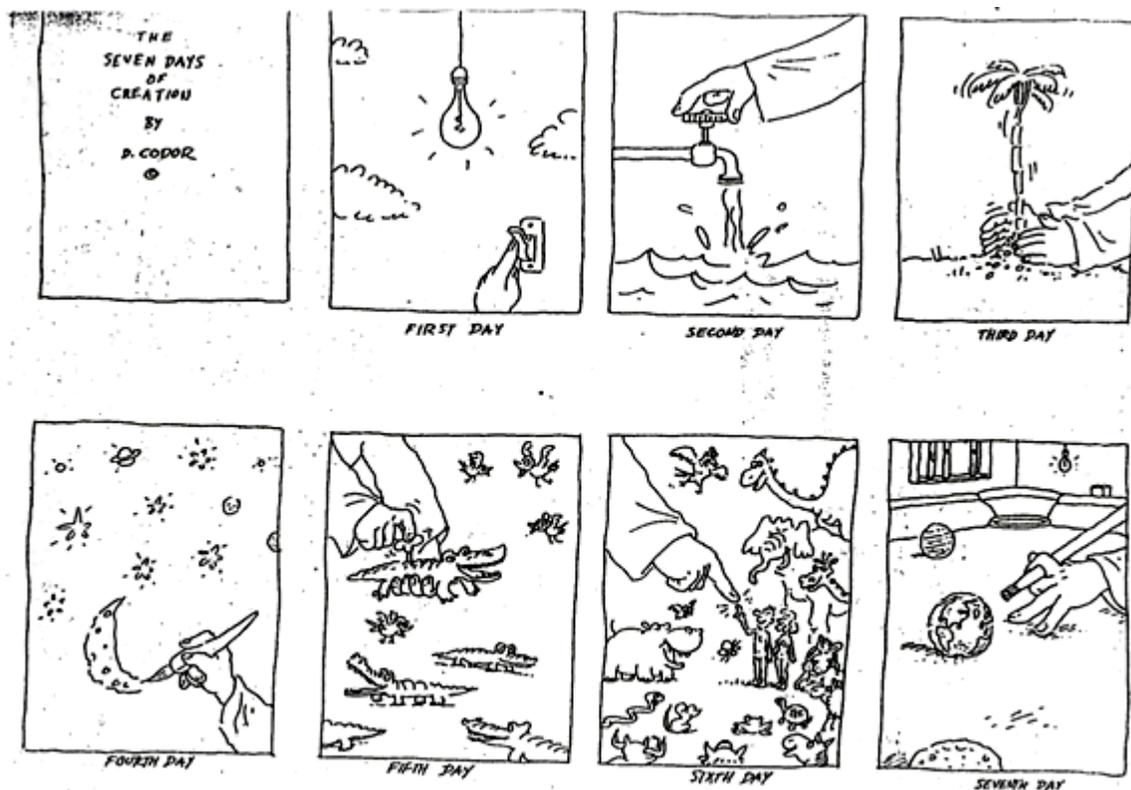
It's hard for me to imagine God getting so frustrated with human beings' actions that the Almighty simply throws up God's hands in the air, declaring, "I give up." While I may have had a few moments like that as a parent, that does not accord with my view of the Divine.

So, how can we reclaim this sacred story? First, we look for moral messages. As our Noah presented in his thoughtful, *d'var Torah*, we find insights about how to lead a moral life: do not judge a book by its cover; treating our elders with respect, how we should be good people – even when most people are not and, let's not forget the most important lesson, if God tells you to build a jumbo-sized houseboat, snap to it!

But, what else?

Well, we can look at its literary structure which proves more instructive. The Torah utilizes the same vocabulary and order to describe

the destruction of the universe as it did last week when it detailed the creation of the world. There is order in the disorder.



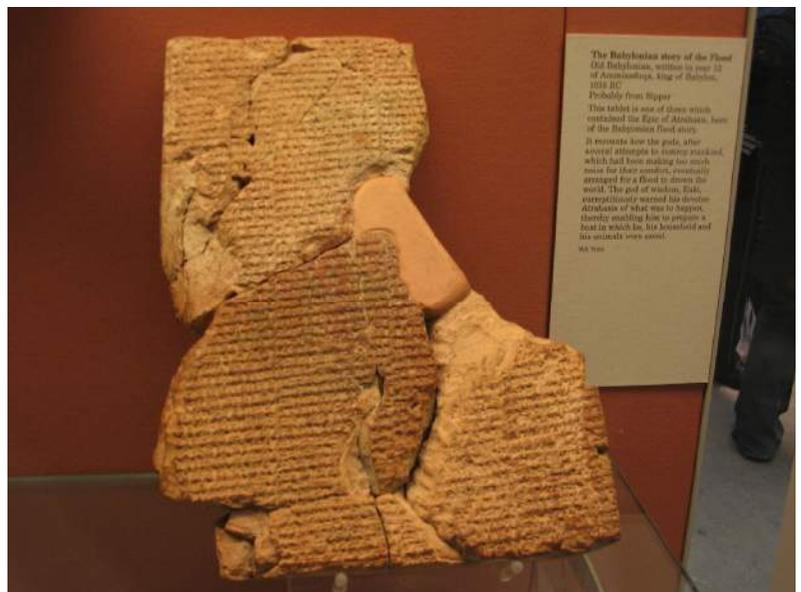
And beyond the literary, we can compare Noah to other protagonists in the Torah like Avraham and Moshe who exemplify more developed moral sensitivities, challenging the Almighty when God wants to destroy the cities of *S'dom* and *Amorah* or the Jewish people in the wilderness.

But, nonetheless, I am looking for more. What moral meaning can we make from this narrative? How can I approach this *parashah*?

Fortunately, as modern Jews, we have many options, including biblical criticism. The biblical critic understands that there are many flood

narratives in different ancient Near Eastern civilizations. Thus, most likely, there was an ancient flood that many people recorded. Recent scientific inquiries demonstrate that thousands of years ago floodwaters from the Persian Gulf rose over much of the Mesopotamian Valley. While we do not know what caused this catastrophe (perhaps incredible amounts of rain or a collision with a heavenly body), water most likely did cover much of the ancient world.

These flood narratives from other civilizations like the Gilgamesh and Atrahasis epics share a great deal with the text of our Torah. There are even many details common: the ark, the raven, and the dove, but there are also great differences to the approach that our Torah takes.



Stone Tablet - Babylonian Flood Story - Epic of Atrahasis

Prof. Everett Fox summarizes it: “In general one may say that in contrast to the earlier (Mesopotamian) versions, the biblical one is unambiguous in both tone and intent. It has been placed in Genesis to exemplify a God who judges the world according to human behavior,

punishes evil and rescues the righteous. This is a far cry from the earlier accounts, where the gods plan the destruction of the world for reasons that are unclear (or in one version, because humankind's noise is disturbing the sleep of the gods), and where the protagonist, Utnapashtim, is saved as the result of a god's favoritism without any moral judgments being passed.” (*Five Books of Moses*, p. 34)

That feels like something that distinguishes our texts from the others in a positive way. We learn from this that when the Jewish people came to make sense of what must have been an unbelievably terrible disaster sometime on the border between prehistory and history, our ancestors, infused morality into their understanding, as they attempted to understand something that must have been so awful.

The Torah teaches us something timeless – there will be disasters and tragedies. Although we will not be able to make sense of them all, we can do our best to act morally in the face of them. As the *parashah* opens, “*Noah* ish tzadik, tamim hayah b’dorotav – Noah was a righteous person, a moral person in his generation.” OK, so his generation was not that good, but he tried to be better – so it should be with us. Let’s not look around to see how our neighbor is behaving and emulate that, let’s try to do better.

The various Mesopotamian flood stories present the flood as their gods' response to overpopulation or as an arbitrary act, but our Torah highlights human behavior. "Adonai saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and now every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And Adonai regretted that God had made man on earth, and God's heart was saddened." (Gen. 6:6) This verse from the end of last week's reading is instructive, as it highlights human behavior. We cannot totally control disasters or disease, but we can pay more attention to how we act.

And there is something else striking: "Ya'yitatziv el libo – God's heart was saddened."

Ascribing to the Divine, human emotions may be philosophically



"It's a memo from our parent company. They remind us to pay attention, quit slouching, take our elbows off the table and to act our age, if it's not too much to ask!"

challenging to some, but quite meaningful to others. God is in a relationship with us: when we act poorly, God is disappointed. Just as a parent, seeing his or her child behave in a hurtful manner is filled with disappointment, so does the Almighty approach us.

The parent feels that the child has not learned critical lessons about how to behave, lessons the parent should have taught. The parents feel that they have failed to teach their child. Here, in our Torah, God feels the same way.

Our ancestors took a natural disaster of epic proportions and attempted to infuse it with a call to morality, but the Torah leaves us with even more.

For me the deepest teaching in this *parashah* is the notion of *brit*, covenant. God makes a covenant with Noah, an agreement that places obligations on Noah and on God. God promises never to destroy the world again by flood and offers the rainbow as a sign of this covenant between Noah and the Almighty.

As the
Torah states:
“When the
rainbow is in
the clouds, I
will see it and
remember the
everlasting



covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth. That,' God said to Noah, 'shall be the sign of the covenant that I have established between Me and all flesh that is on earth.'" (Gen. 9:16-17)

Our rabbis understand that Noah was given seven laws, the seven Noahide Commandments. Thus, the Torah is not concerned with guiding the Jewish people alone, but also includes others. This is a tradition that has a broad scope.

Our Torah is about establishing a moral vision for all humanity. Time and time again we are taught that Jews are supposed to be an *or lagoyim*, a light unto the nations. We are supposed to try as best as we can to live on a moral and spiritual level that will lift ourselves, our communities and even other groups higher as well.

Parashat Noah foreshadows the birth of the Jewish people. Think about it: both here and in the birth of Moses, the people are saved by being in an ark or a ship, using the same word: *teivah*. The word *teivah* appears in the entire *Tanakh*, in the entire Hebrew Bible, only in these two places. From this, we learn that the saving of humanity and the birth of the Jewish people are parallel.

But our Torah cares passionately not merely about our people and our relationship with God, but also about all humanity.

That is what is so miraculous about *Parashat Noah*. It is a narrative about a tragedy that at its end, replaces disorder and disaster with moral meaning. In our Torah, the Almighty gives us a path to work against our own human inclinations towards evil, towards doing the wrong thing.

The Torah presents us with the morality that is the antidote to human wickedness; nowhere else in Near Eastern traditions is there such a response.

And while I love the Disney version, it is the Torah's moral message that is truly inspiring.