

Noah 5766 Problems with the Flood

Shabbat Shalom.

Sometimes before you ask a tough question, you need to smile. Let's see if this works: I was sent this email: "Everything I need to know, I learned from Noah's Ark.

ONE: Don't miss the boat.

TWO: For safety's sake, travel in twos.

THREE: Build your future on high ground.

FOUR: When you're stressed, float awhile.

FIVE: Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals.

SIX: No matter the storm, when you are with God, there's always a rainbow waiting."

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Now, on to the tough question. This morning we read the famous account of Noah and the flood. In many ways, this year has been the year of the flood. From the tsunami in Southeast Asia some ten months ago to Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans and to our own localized flooding right here in New England, the world has endured deluge after deluge.

We might look at the world around us and see that it stands in stark contrast to the Torah's perspective, since at the end of this morning's parashah, God states that there will never be another flood to destroy the earth. That does not seem to be true.

Perhaps we can understand this in light of the fact that God states that there will never be another flood "*leshaheit ha-aretz* – to destroy the entire earth." But apparently, as we see all too clearly, there will still be floods that will cause devastation.

But that is not our biggest problem. As Emily and I were discussing the Torah reading this week, we asked: why does this terrible flood occur? Why would God do this? The Torah states at the end of last week's reading: "Adonai saw how great was humanity's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And Adonai regretted that God made human beings on earth, and God's heart was saddened." (Genesis 6:5-6) It is then that God decides to wipe out the earth.

The Torah's theology is that the flood occurred because of the sins of humanity. As it states in this morning's *parashah*, "The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness." (Genesis 6:11)

That's a problematic theology. Surely, there were children and some innocent people who were killed in this flood along with those who might have been guilty. That presents us with a difficult portrayal of God.

In addition, some try to read this same theology into our world today – just as Noah's flood was a punishment for moral laxity, so too, were these floods were caused by humanity's actions. With the exception of perhaps the environmental argument – that these floods have occurred because of our polluting the environment causing global warming, which has some resonance with me – most of these explanations are wrong and offensive, blaming innocent people for natural disasters. They do not merit much discussion.

This morning, I want to utilize a number of approaches to answer this question of how we can make sense of this problematic text. First, I want to offer the perspective of this often-maligned movement within modern Judaism. As Conservative Jews, we have a

difficult path. We don't always have all the religious passion, clarity of thought and clear answers of the Orthodox and we have stricter standards than the Reform. What do we offer? Well, I could get into a long talk about our moderate, centrist approach and its upside, but that is not my theme for today.

Today, I want to utilize our movement's approach to study. As Conservative Jews, we do not run away from the historical approach, nor do we allow it to damage our faith in our tradition, moving us away from our people's customs. Instead, we use its light to illuminate our past, gleaning new insights about our sacred texts and how these narratives can impact on our lives.

When we utilize this historical approach to the story of Noah and the flood, we find that there were many stories of an ancient flood in Mesopotamian literature. In this sense, our Torah is not unique. This flood narrative was widespread, which supports the contention that there was, in fact, a devastating ancient flood that caused widespread devastation.

While the Torah is not the only account of this ancient flood, its version contains some significant differences from the others. In our Torah, Noah, the hero, was saved because he was seen as a more moral person than those around him, while in the other ancient texts the rescue of the hero occurs inadvertently by one god acting against another. In some of the other ancient texts, the flood is caused because the gods feel threatened by humanity's overpopulation, thus deciding to wipe out the earth. The Torah mentions only moral behavior. This is a new barometer that the Torah brings into the world – our behavior is what is important.

Imagine for a minute that we are living in ancient Mesopotamia some 5000 years ago and a devastating flood wiped out almost everything that we knew. There is no science to explain this tragedy. No weatherman can tell us what occurred. No one could search the internet and learn more information. We would be alone and afraid. We would search for answers, to make sense of our world and the tragedy. Those different ancient understandings shed great light upon various world-views.

For example, the authors of the Gilgamesh epic, one of these Mesopotamian flood narratives, did not believe that morality and justice must undergird the entire world, as opposed to the teaching of our Torah.

Another key difference is about God. In the Torah's understanding, God has great sympathy for humanity. In fact, the text says that God is sad. We learn the value of compassion - that God is distressed at the corruption and immorality of humanity. That may inspire people to be more compassionate as well. And then, after the flood, God repairs the relationship with humanity, delivering a moral law that confirms the sanctity of human life, reminding us that we should not take another life. This is most needed, especially after a tragedy where there is great loss of life; one might somehow feel that human life is less valuable. The Torah comes along to reinforce the opposite. God also provides a reminder of the covenant between the Almighty and humanity with the rainbow.

While we learn all of these lessons from biblical scholars, the truth is that we do not read the Torah only in the context of its time. The Torah for us as Jews is read through the lenses of our tradition – through thousands of years of interpretation. Our rabbis were also troubled by this text as well. Why did God not give the people a chance

for *teshuvah*, for repentance, as God does in the book of Jonah which we read on Yom Kippur?

The rabbis composed a beautiful midrash which is found in the *Tanhuma*. It explains that God wanted the people of Noah's generation to change their behavior, and that's why God commanded Noah to build the ark. It is to serve as a warning to his generation. Unfortunately, no one pays attention.

As the midrash it states, "God said, 'If Noah starts to work on the ark, people will gather around him and say to him, 'What are you making?' and he will answer, 'I am building an ark because God is about to bring a flood upon the earth due to all of the wickedness. You must repent.'"

God hoped that the ark would serve as a warning, but the people of Noah's generation paid no attention to what Noah was building and to his warnings.

While that is clearly a significant rewrite of this biblical story, it is one that was composed almost 1,500 years ago to update this text and its portrayal of God.

Let me return to my comparison of the Mesopotamian accounts and the book of Genesis. One of the most distinctive differences between the Torah and the Mesopotamian accounts is that, in the Torah, only Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives enter the ark along with all the animals. In the other accounts, there are other builders, boatmen, relatives, friends, etc., etc., who accompany the hero and his family.

Now you might say that's a little more realistic as well as more moral, and you might be right. But the Torah's teaching is offering us another message. The Torah wants to end this terrible tragedy on a positive note. Only in the Torah's understanding is there a single family of humanity, and it is, in fact, a major theme. This reminds us that all of humanity is linked. We are all descendents of Noah and before Noah, Adam and Eve. We are all part of the same web of life. This is then linked with the *keshet*, the rainbow, reminding us that while we come in different colors, we are all part of one spectrum.

Another beautiful insight of our Torah. Summing up all of these lessons, the biblical scholar and commentator Nahum Sarna wrote, "Whatever be its literary history, the Flood story of the Torah stands out as an authentic, original expression of the religious genius of Israel. Conceptually, spiritually, and morally, it stands in striking contrast to all the other versions."

May the Torah and our tradition never cease to enlighten us and our world.
Shabbat Shalom.