## Noah 5767 Humanity

Shabbat Shalom.

I like surprises (well, at least, good ones). In the spirit of that, I will open with a surprising text: The story of Romulus and Remus. I assume that most of you were not a expecting a Roman myth this Shabbat, but here is goes.

The twin brothers Romulus and Remus were the sons of the god Mars. When they were very young, they were abandoned by the banks of the River Tiber to fend for themselves. Luckily, they were found by a she-wolf who, taking pity on them, nursed them with her milk.

Later a shepherd found the boys, took them home, and raised them as his own children. The boys, who naturally enough, grew up to be strong and clever, decided to build a town on the spot where the shepherd had found them.

Shortly after building the town, the twins had a big argument about who should be in charge. Romulus overpowered his brother Remus who was killed in the fight. Romulus then became the first king of this town, which he named Rome, after himself.

That's the short version. So, why did I share this legend?

Well, beyond its obvious parallel to Cain and Abel and its role in Star Trek lore, it's a classic foundation story. It explains the history of Rome – how the capital of the Roman Empire came into being.

Let's return to our text: to the Torah. Last week, we read the foundation story of the entire universe: the Creation. God creates the world in seven days. So, what happens this week? While there are some twists and turns, God basically creates life on earth again.

At the end of the flood, Noah and his family come out of the Ark onto dry land: the second first family of the world. All the animals, creeping things, and birds come out of the ark by family, repeating some of the same language from the opening chapter of Genesis. The parallel is strengthened with God's command to Noah: "*Pru u'rvu u'mil'u et ha-aretz* – Be fruitful and increase and fill the earth." (Gen. 9:1) The command and the words are identical to what we find in last week's *parashah*, when God creates the first humans. This is deliberate. Noah is another foundation story; it explains the origins of all humanity, albeit in a manner different from what we read last week.

The question is, why. Why have the creation narratives of last week and then follow up with Noah? What is the new insight?

This is not a new question and, of course, like most questions, it has been asked before. Rashi, the master commentator living in 11<sup>th</sup> century France, opens his commentary on the Torah by quoting Rabbi Yitzhak: The Torah should have begun with Exodus, chapter 12, verse 1 – "haHodesh hazeh hu lakhem – this month is to you the first of the months." Rabbi Yitzhak wants to know why the Torah does not simply begin with the first commandment given to the Israelites after they leave Egypt, which is Rosh Hodesh – setting the calendar based on Rosh Hodesh – the new moon and celebrating that. Why do we need all the narratives of the book of Genesis? Better to begin with the laws that pertain to the Jewish people. After all, at is core, the Torah is a book of laws!

But there's another question to be asked: why not begin the Torah with next week's Torah reading: *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, which contains the command to Abram to leave his father's house and journey to the land of Israel? Since next week we will read of how our earliest ancestor, Abram, began his spiritual journey, and we are all the descendants of his vision, that seems like a good place to start the Torah.

But like many good questions, the answer is found right in the question. The Torah does not commence with *Lekh Lekha*, with Abraham, because the Torah is not solely for the Jewish people, it has a broader message. Like the book of Jonah, fresh in our minds from Yom Kippur, it reminds us that the world does not begin or end with the Jewish people. While we have a role and a special covenantal relationship with God, we are also part of all humanity.

Parashat Noah further reminds us that God does not have a sacred covenant only with us, but with all people. The first time the word *brit*, covenant, is mentioned in the Torah is in this morning's reading where God states: "V'hakeemoti et briti – I will establish my covenant. It's noteworthy that the first covenant is not with Abraham, but with Noah, representing all humanity. All humanity, all that lives, will be a part of this covenant. The rainbow is given as a universal sign of this bond between God and all life.

To help guide Noah and his offspring, God offers a series of commandments: to procreate, not to eat blood or murder. The rabbis develop these into what they call the Noahide Laws. While every Jew is commanded to observe all 613 mitzvot, non-Jews are to observe the seven Noahide laws. They are generally enumerated as: the prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, and eating a limb from a living animal, as well as the injunction to establish a legal system. The first six are all negative - things not to be done - and the last is understood as commanding the enforcement of the first six. One who fulfills these commandments is considering a *hasid*, a righteous person.

Thus, it is clear that the Torah is concerned about all humanity and we, as Jews are to understand the significance of all people. Without *Parashat Noa<u>h</u>*,

God's covenant with Noah and the concept of the Noahide Laws, we might focus on ourselves too much.

Caring for all humanity is a central Jewish value, and it has always been a part of our tradition. We have always been engaged not only in mitzvot that pertain to rituals and sacred traditions in our own spiritual life, but also in the larger world, making sure that others are taken care of.

Almost two thousand years ago, the Jerusalem Talmud explicitly links acts of righteousness and kindness by Jews towards gentiles with other concepts, such as *kiddush hashem*, the sanctification of God's name. Through deeds and actions, our people display a concern for all those in need, and thus God's name, if you will, is even made holy. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine, and one of the great spiritual mentors of recent time, summed up this position well when he wrote, "The love for Israel entails a love for all humanity."

As the article in this week's Boston Jewish Advocate points out, there is an up-tick in recent years in Jews' political and social activism. Jews and synagogues are at the fore of so many projects helping others, including the campaign to end the genocide in Darfur.

Organizations like the American Jewish World Service have grown to offer Jews opportunities to help others around the globe. AJWS has designed missions for Jews to volunteer in Latin American, New Orleans, and other places in need.

Another example was created by my colleague, Rabbi David Rosenn, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary's Rabbinical School, who developed AVODAH, a Jewish service corps, as an alternative to the Peace Corps. For the year after college, one can live in a communal home in New York, Washington, or Chicago, and volunteer for a social action or community action organization while living with other young Jews. Through the program, they study Jewish texts and nurture their own spiritual lives, even as they support each other and participate in *Tikkun Olam*, healing the world. Avodah is a perfect example of the synthesis between Jews exploring their own Jewish identity through performing acts of *hesed*, acts of loving-kindness.

This has always been a part of Temple Emunah's agenda, and it continues to expand. When I sit down with our staff to discuss upcoming programs, including social events, we try to look for ways to incorporate *hesed* into those activities. Josh Furman is leading a Kadima outing this Sunday. Before their fun activity, the group is stopping at Sandra's Lodge to donate all of the toiletries that they have collected over the last month. This is a great opportunity to weave together Jewish identity and fun, and Josh will frame it with Jewish learning – providing an opportunity for our children to appreciate our

tradition, strengthen their Jewish identity and perform an act of <u>hesed</u> – all woven together on a Sunday afternoon.

This is not to say that we do not take care of our own, whether in Israel, around the globe, or poor Jews right here in Boston – and there are many more than we think. We need to do both. The Mishnah explains this well. First we take care of *aniyei beitkha* (the poor of our own house), then *aniyei irkhah* (the poor in our city), and then those beyond. These are concentric circles, and we begin with those closest to us, but if we do not reach those more distant circles, we fail.

Recently the Jewish community has moved beyond simply raising funds for causes, and we are, once again, acting with our feet. Jews have gone down to New Orleans to rebuild homes and Jews have gone to rallies to end the genocide in Darfur. This is a good sign. As was the case in the Civil Rights movement, we are moving beyond raising money to raising roofs and walls. We are not just writing checks, but seeing the faces and hearing the voices of those in need.

As we prepare for this coming election in just over a week, make sure we act with our feet, that we vote and participate in our democracy that, hopefully, allows us to help others in our society.

And as we recall the Torah's earliest foundation stories, let us not forget that they remind us of our obligations toward all humanity.

Shabbat Shalom.