

Shabbat shalom!

The holidays are over and we are now settled down to the routine we know so well. We work 5 days a week, and on Shabbat we celebrate the creation of the world. We rest, and refrain from work and commerce. We have resumed the cycle of Torah reading, beginning last week when we read Parashat Bereshit.

Noach, the next Parashah, is a charming story, appealing especially to little children. All the animals line up in twos and come aboard the Ark and are saved from the Flood.

However, a closer reading of the text shows a more serious even ominous side to the story. The Flood myth is present in many cultures, but the Torah invests the story with sweeping cosmic meanings which consider fundamental issues of human existence.

You will recall that the Noach story begins at the end of Parashat Bereshit. (Chumash p. 34) (verses of the Maftir v. 5-8). The narrative acknowledges God's regret in creating Man, and he voices a desire to destroy his creation. Yet Noach is a saving grace. He will save Noach and his family, and the innocent creatures of the earth, but utterly destroy the rest of Humankind. Noach is described as an Ish Tsaddik, a righteous man. But the Torah qualifies this as "Tammim haya b'dorotov" perfect in his generation. Rashi comments that in his day, with the world so violent, Noach appeared to be a Tsaddik. But when compared to Abraham, he was nothing. This is relevant to this story, since Noach and Abraham are often compared. God proposed to Abraham that he destroy Sodom, and Abraham vigorously protests. God proposed to Noach that he will destroy all the rest of Humankind, and Noach is silent.

I now wish to compare the blessings that Adam and Noach received from God. In a sense, the Flood meant a second beginning for human existence. Here are the relevant quotes: (NL insert).

There are similarities but also differences:

1. Adam is bidden to subdue the world. Noach is not.
2. Adam is enjoined to enjoy the fruits of the earth together with the animals in a spirit of good will and sharing. Noach is to dominate the earth by fear and dread.
3. Adam is given fruits and green plants to eat and is really directed to be a vegetarian. Noach is given permission to eat animal flesh, ie to be carnivorous.

4. Eating of animal flesh must be done through slaughtering or hunting. Flesh from a living beast is not permitted.
5. Finally, in the charge to Noach, there is a commandment against murder. (v. 6) and a rationale for a legal system which can execute a murderer. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood is shed." Man is special for he is created in the image of God.

Everett Fox explains that the passage after the Flood speaks of a God who is "remarkably receptive to a human kind of change. From having been sorry that he had created humankind, now he evinces a change of heart about the entire issue of evil, conceding human imperfections. Where later in Genesis human characters exhibit the capacity to change, here it is God himself who changes."

This post-deluvian blessing established Noach as a second Adam, a progenitor of the entire human race. But with Noach, for the first time in the Bible, we hear about a covenant (brit)...no more floods, and the sign of the covenant is the rainbow.

Lastly, I will talk about the Noahide Laws (Mitzvot B'nai Noach). These are 7 laws that apply to all people. In Sanhedrin 105a we read that righteous people of all nations have a share in the world to come. These laws derive from the Talmud's interpretation of Gen. 2:16. "And the Lord God commanded the Man, saying, of every tree of the Garden, you are free to eat."

Here are the Noahide Laws: The first 5 are from Gen.2; the last 2 are from Noach.

1. Prohibition of idolatry
2. Prohibition of murder
3. Prohibition of theft
4. Prohibition of sexual immorality
5. Prohibition of blasphemy
6. Prohibition of eating flesh from a living animal
7. Requirement of a maintaining courts to provide legal recourse.

Jews are obliged to observe the 613 mitzvot of the Torah. Non-Jews may observe the Seven Noahide Laws and be deemed righteous. There are groups today who observe these laws and consider themselves B'nai Noach and use the rainbow as their symbol. There is some evidence that when the earliest evangelizing Christians turned their conversion effort toward Gentiles, they jettisoned circumcision and other Torah laws in the name of the Noahide Laws for gentiles. I read that the Druze in Israel today revere Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who is said to have accepted the Noahide Laws.

The story of Noach endures. I saw a Bruce Feiler travelogue on TV a few years ago, where he set out to explore Mt Ararat, searching for evidence of the Ark. In any case, I tried to make the case that this ancient story has profound meaning, exploring early humankind, and very basic nature of human civilization and its relationship to issues of good and evil. So keep looking for the Big Rainbow.

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SPK

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