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SHABBAT NOACH: GLOBAL CLIMATE-HEALING SHABBAT

“And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the Earth.” (Genesis 9:16)

The Torah portion of Noah details a terrible ecological disaster – the flood that immerses the world in water and brings an end to all life – all because of humankind’s despicable behavior. Noah may have been the first environmental activist. He acted upon a divine commandment to keep every species of animal safe on his ark. The biblical story ends with an eternal covenant between God and humanity, in which we are promised that the land will never be destroyed again at the hands of the Creator.

Today, we are once again experiencing widespread destruction of the Earth, this time not as a divine punishment, but as a direct result of human actions. What is the connection between our generation and the generation of Noah? What can we learn from Noah’s story? And how, with our collective strengths, can we prevent the next flood?

Let’s start by answering the following question: Do we control the world or are we dependent on God’s gifts? The story of the flood begins with a description of the evil that has fallen upon the land: “And the Earth was corrupt before God, and the Earth was filled with violence.” (Genesis 6:11)

The biblical commentator Rashi explains that the word “violence” refers to stealing. If so, what did people steal in order to bring upon themselves such a punishment?

One interesting idea presented in the Midrashic anthology “Yalkut Shimoni” is that the generation of the Flood committed the sin of hubris – intense pride before nature and the order of the world. The *dor haflagah* – the generation that built the tower of Babel after the flood – is described as the generation that revealed how to control nature and its resources. With the help of technological developments and other means, the people of this generation reached a state in which they felt that they were without fear before the strengths of nature and no longer relied on divine intervention.

The midrash (Sanhedrin 108:2) further emphasizes this point, describing the reactions of the people upon seeing Noah building the ark. If a flood of water should come from the land, says the generation of Noah, they will reinforce the land with poles of steel. And a flood of fire will not scare them. They feel so perfected that they have no reason to fear anything – they feel prepared for any kind of natural disaster. The ability to act from within nature brings the generation of the flood to heightened pride before the world and before God. This pride brings them to stealing – perhaps by stealing the world’s resources. All these together, led to the inevitable consequence: the flood that destroyed the world.

Noah's Acts:

In the arrogant, violent world of the generation of the flood, Noah was chosen to save and perpetuate the existence of life. But why was Noah chosen to survive, while the rest of humanity was decimated? The Torah says that Noah “found favor” in the eyes of God, but it is never quite clear to us why this man and his family were saved from disaster while others were not.

Still, Noah and his family were not saved alone. Following God’s commandment, he placed into his ark all the species of the world and cared for them for an entire year.

Our sages describe Noah’s difficult work in the ark in detail – holy work done through selflessness and kindness. According to the midrash Tanchuma, “throughout those 12 months, Noah and his sons did not sleep, because they had to feed the animals, beasts and birds.”

The Talmud also explains that the ark had three levels – one for Noah and his family, one for the animals, and one for the animals’ waste – revealing how much energy he put into their care. Another legend says that Noah endangered his life, and was even wounded, when he went to feed a lion. According to Rashi, Noah worked so hard that he would groan and grow faint from the burden of the animals.

Noah’s concern extended beyond the animals of the world. He also considered the continuity of plant life, bringing with him onto the ark “good things to plant, fig shoots and olive saplings” (Midrash Rabba: Noah 1:14). Clearly, Noah, in the earliest known case of nature preservation, went out of his way to save animals and plants. There is only one species that Noah made no effort to save: humans.

The Zohar – the book of Jewish mysticism – relates the following story: When Noah left the ark after having seen the world destroyed, Noah began to cry before God and he said, “Master of the universe, You are called compassionate. You should have been compassionate for Your creation.” God responded and said, “You are a foolish shepherd. Now you say this? Why did you not say this at the time I told you that I saw that you were righteous among your generation, or afterward when I said that I will bring a flood upon the people, or afterward when I said to build an ark? I constantly delayed and I said, ‘When is Noah going to ask for compassion for the world?’...And now that the world is destroyed, you open your mouth, to cry in front of me, and to ask for supplication?” (Zohar Hashmatot: Genesis 254b)

We will never know why Noah did not fight to revoke the evil decree and spare the world from destruction. Perhaps in his heart Noah believed that the world, harsh and depraved as he knew it, was not suited for redemption. Only the “innocent” animals were meant to survive. Or perhaps Noah was afraid that the essence of his generation would rub off on him, and he also would be destined for destruction. In this sense, Noah essentially was living in his own ark even before the flood and didn’t feel a connection or responsibility to the world that was to be decimated.

It is impossible to know what stopped Noah from requesting God’s mercy. Yet we do know that his descendent Abraham did not suffer from the same complacency regarding his fellow human beings. Ten generations later, we see Abraham pleading with God to exercise mercy on the people of Sodom. Abraham opens his eyes to the plight of the innocent and attempts to intercede on their behalf.

After the Flood:

After the waters receded from the face of the earth, Noah sacrificed an offering to God, who, upon smelling the pleasing scent, made a fundamental decision: “I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake; for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more everything living, as I have done. While the Earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.” (Genesis 8:21-22)

With Noah and the inhabitants of the ark – all living beings – God made an eternal covenant:

“And God spoke unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying: ‘As for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you, and with your seed after you; and with every living creature that is with you, the fowl, the cattle, and every beast of the Earth with you; of all that go out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. And I will establish My covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of the flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the Earth.’ And God said: ‘This is the token of the covenant which I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between Me and the Earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring clouds over the Earth, and the bow is seen in the cloud, that I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the Earth.’ And God said unto Noah: ‘This is the token of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is upon the Earth.’” (Genesis 9:8-17)

Today, we are experiencing an ecological crisis that is characterized by phenomena such as glacial melting, extended drought, accelerated species migration and widespread disease. Most of these problems originate from the unchecked utilization of natural resources by humans and the creation of excess waste and pollution. In many cases, it may be argued that the entire ecological crisis is a direct result of the very societal ills found in the generation of Noah – “and the land was filled with violence.”

This story does not need to repeat itself. We are all children of Noah, but we are also children of Abraham. From Noah, we received the ability to exercise responsibility for nature and the biodiversity of species, and the willingness to work hard to retain and repair our world. Unfortunately, we also resemble Noah in our ability to separate ourselves from others so that our righteousness should not be blemished. It is easy to stay secluded at home, ignoring the problems of the world. A bigger challenge is to face the world and embrace its needs as our own.

In this, we should see ourselves as children of Abraham, who calls upon us to be an integral part of the world – to sit at the opening of our tent and invite everyone to join in a life of faith in the good, love of our fellow people and the willingness to fight for justice.

May we all be as children of the devoted Noah and children of the faithful Abraham. May we all uphold the covenant of the world’s perpetual existence and act for our sakes and the sake of the world around us. And let us not forget – in today’s reality, we are all in the same ark.

Source: Einat Kramer