

Noach

Parshat Noach is about peace, love, survival.

The Bible story begins:

When the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on Earth and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He has made man on Earth, and His heart was saddened.

The Lord said, I will blot out from the Earth the men whom I created – men together with beasts, creeping things and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.

God thought to destroy all of creation.

But Noah was a righteous man and found favor with the Lord.

This story circulated in various versions around the Middle East in Biblical times and was told and retold by various peoples. Eventually the Jews canonized their version in the Book of Genesis.

Other versions have survived, such as the Sumerian, which is the closest to our story:

Gilgamesh

*Utnapishtim said to him, to Gilgamesh:
I will reveal to thee, Gilgamesh, a hidden matter
And a secret of the gods will I tell thee:
Shurippak – a city which though knowest,
Which on Euphrates' is situate –
That city was ancient, (as were) the gods within it,
When their heart led the great gods to produce the flood.
Man of Shuruppak, son of Ubar-Tutu,
Tear down (this) house, build a ship!
Give up possessions, seek thou life.
Forswear (worldly) goods and keep the soul alive!
Aboard the ship take thou the seed of all living things.
The ship that thou shalt build,
Her dimensions shall be to measure.
Equal shall be her width and her length.*

*On the fifth day I laid her framework.
One (whole) acre was her floor space,
Ten dozen cubits each edge of the square deck.
I provided her with six decks.
Dividing her (thus) into seven parts.*

After the flood

Then I sent forth and set free a raven.

*The raven went forth and, seeing that the waters had diminished,
He eats, circles, caws and turns not round.*

Then I let out (all) to the four winds

And offered up a sacrifice.

The gods smelled the savor,

The gods smelled the sweet savor,

The gods crowded like flies about the sacrifice.

The biggest difference between these stories is paganism vs. monotheism.

Life in the realm of the pagan gods was a reflection of the human life on Earth. The gods argued, fought, were sexual and interacted with humans. And humans could influence the gods with magic and sacrifices.

All of this came to an end with the advent of monotheism – belief in one God, who represents morality and righteousness. It was a monumental development in human thought which made the world a universe, rather than a multiverse, gave humankind responsibility over its destiny and made possible the transcendence of ethical values. Human destiny was not determined by the cavorting of the gods or by magic.

In the Jewish mind human destiny was and is determined by human morality. The Jews saw the link between righteousness and survival and they sanctified righteousness, and they legislated it. The Jews saw what was at stake and they made it their mission as a people. They developed sacred writings commanding love and insisting on the goal of peace, shalom.

They committed themselves to the mission of representing the requirement of righteousness, and justice and empathy as prime values in the world. They saw themselves as the *or lagoyim* – light unto the nations.

They maintained that this had to be done by sanctifying the rule of law – *mitzvot* – commandments enforced by an inexplicable unearthly force, omniscient and omnipotent GOD, who makes the commandments sacred.

This Jewish insight and sense of mission have remained our signature for millennia and have been further disseminated to billions of people through the other two Abrahamic faiths. This insight has remained eternally relevant because on some level almost everyone knows that it is correct.

The link between righteousness and survival is repeated often throughout all Jewish sacred writings.

The stories of Genesis teach God's demand of mortality

Cain kills Abel and God asks "where is your brother?" and he responds *Hashomer achi anochi?* "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The Noah story – violence = destruction

The destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah for the lack of 10 righteous people makes the same point

Deuteronomy 11 plus many other sites

If you heed God's commandments the rain will fall, and if not you will die of starvation

We say it every day as part of the shema

The prophets say it over and over

Isaiah 57, which we chant in the haftorah on Yom Kippur is explicit regarding God's expectations – caring for the poor and hungry and naked

The Talmud & Midrash have the same message over and over

There is the famous story about the revered rabbi Hillel, who lived in the first century BCE. He was asked if he could teach the whole Torah while standing on one foot. He said, "Sure! That's easy. What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. All the rest is the explanation of this." In other words, "love your neighbor as yourself."

We are at a crossroads regarding peace and love and survival.

After 2 World Wars in the last century (one in my lifetime), after 80 million deaths in those wars, including 6 million Jews we seemed to set out on the path of world peace. We, the United States, were generous and far-sighted.

- We created the Marshall Plan and helped our former enemies rebuild
- We worked to establish the United Nations Organization
- The Europeans came together in the European Union

We have had 70 years of relative world peace – maybe longer than ever before. And world extreme poverty has been reduced by 40-50%. This is how peace happens.

What about now? Have we forgotten the lesson of these wars? Have we forgotten the atomic weapons now available?

Now we are getting a message of "America first". No more generosity. Now we are getting a message that we don't want immigrants who are poor or uneducated. There go my grandparents and most of yours. Now we are getting a message that the United States will not care about refugees, no matter if their lives are in danger in their home countries.

We have heard this before, certainly in the 1930's. And who we are also influences other countries.

The parsha tells us to be righteous, to love our neighbor and to pursue peace. It is the eternal Jewish message directed first at ourselves and through us to the world. Above all, it is a warning.

Parshat Noach is about peace, love, and the survival of the human species.

- Sermon by Rabbi Alan Lovins, October 13, 2018 at Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel, New Haven CT