

Noach

According to the Talmud, Noah and his family spent over a year on the ark; sleeping little, and feeding and caring for the many animals they were commanded to bring with them on their journey. It is said to have taken 120 years to build this massive structure, time enough for Noah's neighbors to question both his sanity, and his reason for taking on this task. Plenty of time, in other words, for the people of the world to hear, internalize, self-examine, and choose to change their ways- if only on the off-chance that this crazy neighbor of theirs actually did have a direct phone line to God.

And I have to ask myself, what would I have said or done? Would I have done some self reflection and changed my ways? Or would I have laughed at Noah and dismissed the whole thing outright?

And as Noah was building this ark-this lifeboat, what was on his mind? These were his neighbors. They may not have been the nicest of people, but they were what he knew. He was a 'Tzadik b'dorotav'- a 'righteous' or 'just' man of his generation'. Don't we in some ways know good from bad, right from wrong, etc., based on the times we live in? I remember movies we watched and loved, songs we sang, behaviors we engaged in, slang we used when I was a kid that I cringe to think about now because they are SO inappropriate in language, treatment of others, etc....

So did Noah really know and feel the full extent of the evil that was out there in the world? Noah doesn't question God about the destruction of everyone and everything on the planet. One could interpret this as his acceptance of God's judgement upon the world. That Noah is fully aware that the people are wicked, knows it's useless-maybe even dangerous- to speak with them, so does what he is told and saves what he can.

On the other hand, maybe the fact that he doesn't actively go and try to warn people, or argue the point with God, is an indication that he does not know which behaviors have condemned society. I don't mean rape and murder, incest and thievery, I'm speaking of the more subtle things. Like those things from my childhood. That really were not good or kind and, yet, we all did them. It was a normal part of society. And now, looking back, and being more enlightened, we see and understand why those behaviors were wrong.

In this scenario, it's possible that Noah feels overwhelmed, confused and hopeless. And perhaps hopes that in the years he is building the ark, his community will gain some spark of wisdom-just enough-to tip the scales in their favor.

Either way, to be tasked with building an ark to save your own family KNOWING that your neighbors, the folks with whom you trade at the market, the healers in the village, the peddlers, the tailors, the kids with whom your kids played as youths; will all die- every single one- had to have been a horror unto itself. To know that everyone you knew had been judged, and with the exception of you and your own family, were judged unworthy; and as a result, you were going to be party to their execution. This, I believe, could possibly have been the most traumatic part of the entire experience.

Eli Weisel, one of the most prolific post holocaust scholars and writers of our time, when speaking of Noah exiting the ark in the aftermath of the flood, shared these words: 'Imagine what he must have felt as he walked ashore and discovered the empty, devastated land. He must have looked for familiar ground, vantage points, cities of light and life, dwelling places and their sounds. He knew that they had vanished, still he went on looking for them.

Then he was confronted by a choice: anger or gratitude. He chose gratitude. He offered thanks to heaven... As a survivor, the first, he chose gratitude rather than bitterness: the special gratitude of the survivor. He or she knows that every moment means grace, for he or she could have been in another's place, another who is gone."

"During the catastrophe, Noah was a protagonist; now he has become a witness. And now, more than before, I feel sorry for him. Was he in fact a Just Man? He was a human being, who having gone to the end of night, knew he was condemned to be free: having reached the limits of despair, he felt himself duty-bound to justify hope. I imagine him under his tent, telling his children and grandchildren stories of his own youth when he was only a hundred years old...He speaks of the past in order to shape the future."

At the end of the story, God feels the need to enter into a covenant with Noah; one that will not only keep humanity safe from this type of vengeance and destruction by God again, but will serve as a reminder to God.

When God's fury ignites, God will produce a rainbow. A thing of beauty. A thing of hope. To serve as a reminder of the desolation, and anguish that God's wrath can wreak if not in check. And we, God's creations, are reminded to take care. Take notice. That this world is not our own to toy with. Humanity is not our plaything. People's lives are not ours to do with what we want. All that is, is God's, and what we have is balanced on the tip of hope.

We too are part of this covenant. Witnesses to the darkest depths to which our species can plummet, and witnesses to the heights to which the human soul can soar. And each time we see the rainbow, we must remember that in that covenant there is responsibility: for if we plunge too deep, there is no reset button. We will destroy ourselves, and take the world down with us.

On this Shabbat, Shabbat Noach, May each one of us live in gratitude. Find the blessings in our world and in each other every day. Find the small dark places and do our best to lighten them. One moment- one step at a time. So that the next time God sends up a rainbow and we look up in awe and wonder, God will look down with hope

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