**PARAHAT NOAH**

**(middle portion in triennial cycle)**

**Bereshit/Genesis 8:15 – 10:32**

**Etz Hayim 48; Hertz 31; Plaut 58**

This is Part Two of my double D’var Torah on the creation stories in the Hebrew Bible. Our Parashah this morning covers the famous flood and ark story, which starts when God concludes that Earth Version One must be eradicated and ends when Noah concludes that the dove is not going to return and therefore Earth Version Two can begin. It is a story that all of us know in general, but in detail less well. My d’var will look at some details, partly to note the links to Part One and partly to clarify the moral implications of those details.

Flood stories are common to many civilizations in the ancient Middle East. Perhaps just because their land was so dry, those communities thought of a flood when they wanted a dramatic story. Just as with Part One, the flood story in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which comes from the Mesopotamian civilization and which some people cite as the first fully formed piece of literature known to us, is notable for its similarities to the flood story in the Hebrew Bible. Among other things, both involve building a large box-like vessel without steering equipment,[[1]](#footnote-1) selecting seeds and animals and people to repopulate the earth, and sending out ravens and doves to determine whether the earth has dried out.

However, there are at least as many differences between those other flood stories and our story. Notably, the hero of the Mesopotamian story is a god, or maybe a demi-god, whereas Noah is a human being. He seems to be a good carpenter, and he certainly respects the directions he gets from God, but he is no different from other human beings. Moreover, the thrust of our flood story is about how the one God realizes that in this generation—the tenth generation of human beings since Adam—people were so badly flawed that they were living lawlessly. God’s writing is poetic and full if other worldly phrases, for example, “the floodgates of the sky,” which appears at both the start and the end of the flood. In the Mesopotamian story, the many gods find human beings so noisy that they are having trouble sleeping—quite a difference!

All chumashim recognize that difference; here are two examples:

* The Plaut chumash (56), “Most important, in the Torah, God institutes law as the counteragent of human wickedness, while in the other Near Eastern traditions such a divine response is absent.”
* The Hertz chumash (198): “Unlike its Mesopotamian counterpart, the Hebrew deluge is a proclamation of the eternal that the basis of human society is justice and that any society which is devoid of justice deserves to perish and will inevitably perish.”

Both rabbis make important points, but one cannot stop there. As so commonly said, with both mythology and history, the devil is in the details. A question immediately arises as to whether Noah was a genuinely righteous man, or only righteous by comparison with other human beings in a lawless world. The text is ambiguous. Verse 6:9 says that “he was blameless in his age,” and Verse 7:1 alleges that God says that Noah is “blameless before me.” According to *Eitz Hayim* (41), in the Babylonian Talmud, Yokhanan maintains that the words should be understood relatively, so that “In a more respectable age, he would have been no better than average.” In contrast, Resh Lakish maintains that, “if Noah could be righteous in those evil times,” he “would have been an even better person in a generation that encouraged goodness.” The marvellous new book entitled *The Holiness of* Doubt[[2]](#footnote-2) offers two sentences (pg 14):

There are many interpretations of the purpose of Noah and the Flood story in the Torah. Raising questions about the moral implications of God’s universal condemnation of humanity shockingly isn’t one of them.

We know that “Noah walked with God” (6:9), but evidently he did not ask Him critical questions, so it would seem that Yokhanan interpreted correctly that Noah was only relatively righteous.

Careful reading also identifies some confusing details. Last week, I recognized that there was more than one creation study, but with some chutzpah I could treat them as symbolic versus realistic versions of the same story. This week with the flood and ark, there is no similar escape route. Some parts of the text say that the rain lasted 40 days; other text says 150 days. Some parts of the text say that were a pair of each animal on the ark; other parts say seven pairs. As a result, both medieval and modern scholars accept that two versions of the flood story have been merged into one. More recent scholars—notably, those familiar with the documentary hypothesis--suggest that one part of the flood story emerges from “P”—priestly writing--and the other portion from what is called “JE” or “Yahwist” writing—that is, the large amount of text that is neither priestly nor Deuteronomic. For example, comments about Noah’s righteousness and human wickedness are priestly. Also from priestly sources are those parts of the story that assert that only one pair of each animal went into the ark. In contrast, those parts of the text that assert that seven pairs of each animal are Yahwist. In some cases, there is logic in the choices. The Yahwist portions say that the rain and hence the flood lasted 40 days—a period for which Noah could reasonably stock provisions. In contrast, the priestly portions say it lasted for 150 days, which must expect that they would have help from God, perhaps edible mannah as was delivered later in Biblical history. On the other hand, it is priestly writing that says there was only one pair or each animal aboard the ark, which leaves one wondering how they could have started with sacrifices.

There is no end of questions in Parashat Noah. Contrast God's instructions about entering the ark in Verse 6:18 to those about leaving the ark in Verse 8:15. In the former, the men go first, then the women; in the latter, the men and women come out as couples, each man with his wife. From this wording, many scholars infer that sexual intercourse was prohibited on the ark. *Eitz Hayim* (44) cites an explanation from *Genesis Rabbah--*very early Biblical commentary--that it would have been “unseemly” for those on the ark “to enjoy marital intimacy while the rest of humanity was drowning.” The more ecological explanation recognizes that the ark was what today we would call a closed system that could not allow any increase in the number of mouths to feed. Only after the ark came to rest on land could sexual intercourse again be permitted.

Another question is what happened to fish and other marine animals during the flood? The text says nothing about them. *Eitz Hayim* (46; note to 7:22) says that nothing happened to them; they did not perish. In contrast, most commentators, both Christian and Jewish, say that fish all died because of pollution caused by dead bodies in seas and lakes. Perhaps, but there was also a huge volume of rainwater to dilute that pollution, so I prefer the opinion in *Eitz Hayim.*

Another question for my d’var is whether the flood drove earth back to a pre-creation state, or merely to a state devoid of human beings and animals other than those on the ark? In Verse 8:9, God uses the same words to restore hope as He had previously used to pronounce doom, which suggests that the answer lies closer to a state well past creation. From a broader perspective, Bex Stern-Rosenblatt, who prepares a weekly d’var for *Torah* Sparks, wrote this week that, “God does not need to go to battle with the primordial waters to wrestle them back into confinement. After enough time, they stop. And creation reemerges. The world is still here. We are still here.. . . Having created, you cannot ever totally destroy your creation.” God also says that rainbows will serve a symbol of His future faith in human being. which as *Eitz Hayim* states (note to 8:17), they become, “a symbol of reconciliation between God and humankind.”

In conclusion, I suggest that there is a more important lesson to be learned from that phrase about reconciliation, and indeed from the whole flood story. God declares that there will never again be a flood of the magnitude of this one in the Hebrew Bible. Ignoring the ambiguities, for me these statements reflect ***learning*** on the part of God-- more specifically God learning how to live with the human beings that God Himself created, a thought that has considerable justification in Jewish theology. Moreover, it is a perfect balance with that part of Part One where human beings were all-powerful in relationship to animals, but they had to learn how to moderate their actions to allow for sustainability. Both human beings and God must learn how to think and act in cooperation and in support of the ecological long term.

Shabbat shalom,

1. The Mesopotamian boat could be steered by use of the oars, but Noah’s ark just floated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Holiness of Doubt: A Journey through the Questions of the Torah* by R. Joshua Hoffman(2023). Lanham, Maryland, USA: Bowman and Littlefield. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)