

SUMMER SERMON SERIES III  
III. THE LEGACY OF NOAH  
July 17, 2015

Shabbat shalom!

Tonight my sermon is the third in a series that explores some puzzling biblical episodes, and tries to understand how they might apply in modern life. We saw that Adam and Eve's sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge teaches that Free Will is a core value of Judaism – and we drew the analogy that the kind of rigid thinking displayed by religious fundamentalists and political demagogues does not reflect the Jewish way of looking at issues. Last week we looked at the Tower of Babel story, which (I suggested) teaches that it is precisely our diversity – both in Judaism and in humanity – that is our greatest strength. Tonight we consider the story of the Great Flood. But first, a preamble:

If we were to compare our civilization to the civilization in a remote tribal area of Botswana, we would find little in common. Our language, our culture, the foods we eat and the songs we sing would all seem very remote from each other. But one thing, at least, we clearly have in common. Neither we nor they can ever be certain what motivates God, or what God wants of us. All we know is what we perceive in our world as we experience it, and the rest is mystery.

This is the theme of one of my favorite movies, “The Gods Must Be Crazy,” a 1980 comedy about what happens to the San tribe in the Kalahari Desert of Botswana when a Coke bottle is thrown out of a small plane flying overhead. The tribe lived in complete isolation from the modern world, and after much discussion the elders concluded that the Coke bottle was a gift from the gods. But when tribal members began to fight with each other over possession – the first strife they had ever experienced – the elders decided the bottle was an evil gift, for reasons beyond their understanding, and they concluded that the man who found it had to go on a sacred journey to the edge of the world, throw the bottle off the edge, and return it to the gods. It's a great comedic farce with serious political overtones, and if you haven't seen it I recommend it.

We also have our mysteries, and some of them are recorded in an ancient document called the “Torah.” It tells of many strange and wondrous events, and tries to make sense of them.

One such is the great flood. There is little doubt that a great flood took place; memories have come down to us from virtually every ancient culture in the Near East, going all the way back to the Sumerian creation myth and the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, in which Utnapishtim is tasked by the god Enki to create a giant ship to save his family; baby animals and grains from a flood that would wipe out all animals and humans not on the ship. When the waters finally subside, Utnapishtim sends out a dove, then a swallow, then a raven to see if it's safe to land the ship, which has come to rest on the slopes of Mount Nisir, which today is in Kurdistan.

This literature goes back to the beginning of writing, over 6000 years ago. And there actually seems to have been a great flood, some 7,500 years ago, when the area of the Black Sea was below the level of the Mediterranean. At a certain point, the sedimentary land dam broke, filling the Black Sea Basin with millions upon millions of gallons of water, and flooding an enormous surrounding area; remnants of this flood are readily discernible by geologists, from fossil remains that are clearly from the Mediterranean to the salty composition of the Black Sea itself.

To the ancients, whatever happened had to have been a sign from God. Many are those who even today believe that whatever happens to us must be part of some divine plan. If there was a flood, there must have been a reason, and a lesson to be learned.

In the older stories of the Ancient Near East, the flood was sometimes seen as an act of revenge, as various gods in the pantheon worked out their power struggles and their jealousies. The hero of the story was often a god or demigod. In our story the hero is a human – Noah – and the story is not about the fate of gods at all, but the fate of humanity. And the authors of Torah found a reason: all of humankind had descended so far into sin that God decided to scrap God's creation and start over – leaving only Noah and his family, and of course enough animals, to repopulate the Earth. Apparently God thought that He could get it right the second time. But, as I said before, we can't really know what motivates God; it's hard enough to know what motivates us.

The question that intrigues me is this: What can we say about Noah's character? Does our tradition consider Noah to be a hero? What lesson can we draw from the story of the great flood?

Torah's biography of Noah says: "These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man; he was perfect in his generation. Noah walked with God."

Our tradition teaches that there are no accidents in Torah. The Torah could have just said that Noah was righteous. But if the Torah says "in his generation," this has to mean something.

Our rabbis argue that you could take "in his generation" two ways, one positive, and one negative. The favorable interpretation would be: if Noah was righteous in such a corrupt, sinful age, how much the more so would Noah have been righteous in a good generation. The negative interpretation would be: He was only righteous compared with his generation; in any normal generation Noah would not have been considered of any importance at all.

In other words, was Noah righteous *even* in his generation, or *only* in his generation? Our tradition finally concludes that Noah wasn't really a hero by any standard – he was saved only because he was more righteous than anyone else in his generation, but otherwise nothing special – a pretty ordinary guy.

Our rabbis find support for this view in the following text of Torah, that reads: "Noah walked with God." On the surface, that seems to be a good thing, but our tradition sees a negative in that too. "Walking with God" means that Noah could not walk alone; he required God's support even to achieve whatever righteousness he had. Abraham, on the other hand, was a true hero, because in the Abraham story Torah says that "Abraham walked before God," as if to say Abraham could walk in righteousness by himself.

What seems to be the trouble with Noah? Why is our tradition so down on him? One answer might be this: that when Noah learned about the coming flood, he didn't raise a finger of protest or raise any questions. He blindly followed God's orders, never argued with God for leniency, never tried to save anyone but himself and his family. Contrast that with Abraham, who argues vehemently with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham literally bargains with God: "If even ten righteous people are found there would you destroy the good with the evil?" And contrast Noah with Moses, or repeatedly convinces God to give the people of Israel another chance – rather than destroy them as God first intends to do, for example as punishment for the making of a Golden Calf. Abraham and Moses argue with God for leniency; Noah doesn't raise a peep, aside from becoming a drunken boor at the end of his story.

We don't have to take this story literally in order to draw a lesson from it; personally, I take all religious language to be metaphor, though the challenge is to identify what that metaphor might be.

Our tradition seems to be teaching us the lesson precisely NOT to follow religion blindly, but rather that there is merit and value in raising questions, voicing doubts, and bringing our own conscience to bear on the moral questions of the day. Rocking the boat, in other words, is a good thing.

Not following blindly but living by our moral compass can also be derived from God's instruction to Noah: "Make yourself an ark." A midrash teaches that this can mean "Make *of* yourself an ark." You should be the ark! Each of us, in other words, is responsible for saving the world and everything in it. Our rabbis taught that saving a single life is equivalent to saving the entire world. Noah only saved himself and his family, but if each of us thinks of ourselves as the saving ark, the story takes on a whole new light: Whatever we see of pain or privation or suffering in our world, we must assume at least some measure of responsibility, for saving our world is incumbent upon us all. If each of us became an ark, truly the world would be a better place, and the storms will begin to abate.