

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

The Dove

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Untitled, 2014
Mixed media, acrylic
and newspaper on
cardboard

This is part of a larger painting/collage that in turn is part of a children's book I am making inspired by "Had Gadya," the song we sing at the Pesah Seder's conclusion. The piece this paper cut-out comes from interprets the song's final verse "And God came and killed the angel of death." The verse presents an obvious challenge to a Jewish artist reluctant to "portraiture" God. It also echoes this week's parashah: God steps in after destruction and promises an end to such destruction (Gen. 8:10-22). Perhaps for this reason I gravitated toward recycling this image.

As an "artist" and a chaplain I seek (in Donald Schön's words) "to have a reflective conversation with the materials of a situation," using what I find in collaboration with the person(s) I am with or to whom I am responding. By materials I mean emotions, circumstances, and of course literal materials like the newspapers I saved from the days after September 11, without knowing exactly why. I allow my "Had Gadya" pieces to swallow these materials and regurgitate them in new/old form.

I surmise that "Had Gadya" is meant to help us transition from the liberation night of the Seder back into the violent world of terror we still inhabit. Noah's dove is still with us but as thin as newspaper now, only a hairsbreadth clear of the latest cataclysm.

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Parashat Noah 5776

פרשת נח תשע"ו



Before the Deluge

Marc Gary, Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer, JTS

*"And in the end, they traded their tired wings
For the resignation that living brings
And exchanged love's bright and fragile glow
For the glitter and the rouge
And in a moment they were swept before the deluge."*

(Jackson Browne, "Before the Deluge")

Parashat Noah raises difficult questions about the relationships between the natural world, humanity's morality, and God's justice:

"Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God. ...

The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness. . . [God said to Noah] "For My part, I am about to bring the Flood—waters upon the earth—to destroy all flesh under the sky in where there is a breath of life; everything on earth shall perish. But I shall establish my covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark. . ."

(Genesis 6:9, 11, 17-18)

On first blush, the story of Noah seems to be a straightforward account of God's wielding power over the natural environment to punish immorality while protecting the innocent. This is a theme that echoes strongly throughout the Torah and finds its best known expression in the verses from the Book of Deuteronomy (11:13-21) which we recite twice daily as the second paragraph of the Shema: if we love God and heed God's commandments, then the natural

world will be kind to us and sustain us. But if we stray from God's path, then the environment will turn against us and we will perish.

This is a theology that is difficult for many of us to accept at face value, primarily because it does not correspond to the reality which we experience on a daily basis. Rabbi Richard J. Israel, the former chaplain to Jewish students at Yale University, expressed his frustration with this conception of the world: “[The Shema’s] second paragraph really puts me off,” Rabbi Israel wrote in *The Condition of Jewish Belief*, “speaking as it does about immediate reward and punishment on this earth, through changes in atmospheric conditions. . . This is an idea which has spoken to religious thinkers for generations. It doesn’t to me.” (p.100)

Rashi too was troubled by this “conventional theology” and understood the Noah story in a much more nuanced fashion. Commenting on Gen. 6:13 (“I have decided to put an end to all flesh”), Rashi states: “Wherever you find sexual sin and idolatry, *andralamousia* [summary mass execution] comes to the world and kills good and bad [indiscriminately].” This interpretation comes closer to our experience and understanding. Natural disasters do not discriminate between the innocent and the guilty; they sweep away all in their path with a blind eye to morality. And those who survive do not survive because of their ethical merits. In Tractate Sanhedrin (108a) of the Babylonian Talmud we read this remarkable statement: “Noah had a death sentence sealed against him. But he found favor in the eyes of God.” In other words, Noah was not so different from rest of his generation, but God chose to save him because of God’s own grace. (In Hebrew, Noah spelled backwards is *hen*, favor).

While Rashi was willing to concede that natural disasters do not discriminate between the innocent and the guilty, he still insisted that there is a nexus between the natural world and the moral order. Read again Rashi’s commentary on verse 13 and you will see that he lays the blame for the flood on “sexual sin and idolatry.” The reference to “sexual sin” is particularly telling. Rashi here is speaking not of a sexual indiscretion, but sexual corruption—the wholesale disregard of sexual borders. In Gen. 6:2 we are told that “divine beings [perhaps the celestial entourage of God] saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them.” Rashi extrapolates from that verse to suggest

that all sexual boundaries were ignored and the world was awash in sexuality that knew no borders of marriage, familial relationships, or even species. Viewed in this light, the Flood can be seen as a divine response to this obliteration of moral borders, with God destroying the natural borders between the upper waters (the source of rain) and the lower waters (the oceans) (see Gen. 1:6-7), in effect reversing the Creation process.

The modern biblical commentator Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg refers to this form of sexual lawlessness as “the sexuality of rapacious egotism” (*The Beginning of Desire*, p.52). It is based on a complete pre-occupation with the self and a total disregard for others. In that sense, it is the opposite of love. In the song lyrics which I quoted at the beginning of this commentary, Jackson Browne makes a similar point when he writes that the generation before the deluge “exchanged love’s bright and fragile glow for the glitter and the rouge.”

If there is a connection between moral behavior and the natural world, then I believe it lies here: when we act only for ourselves and disregard the needs of others who share our planet or of future generations who will rely on the environment for their sustenance, then we bring humankind closer to the deluge. If we use our natural resources as if we are the only ones that matter, as if our comfort, our prosperity, our enjoyment supersede the needs of others now and in the future, then we are engaging in a form of “rapacious egotism” which will surely bring a crushing response from the natural world.

Judaism affirms that humans can surpass the self. That is the meaning of the High Holidays and perhaps that is the symbolism behind the rainbow that appears towards the end of the Noah story—it is the light that was lost within humankind that is finally rekindled. Let’s consider the lyrics of Jackson Browne one more time:

*Now let the music keep our spirits high
And let the buildings keep our children dry
Let creation reveal its secrets by and by
When the light that’s lost within us reaches the sky.*