

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Seeing the Faces of Noah's Neighbors

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I am a farmer, I love my wife,
My sons are many and strong, my land is green.
—from “Flood” by Irving Feldman (*Collected Poems 1954-2004*)

With these words, the narrator of Feldman's poem characterizes himself as a hardworking family man—not perfect, but not a sinner. Of Noah he says, “Just like the drunk, the fool, that slut- / Chaser to think of no one else.”

By imagining this character—a farmer and Noah's neighbor—to tell the story of the Flood, Feldman puts a face on those who perished, adding another dimension to the opening verse of this week's Torah reading: “This is the line of Noah—Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:9).

What does the phrase “in his generation” add? A midrash records a rabbinic disagreement. Some argue that the competition for the “blameless” crown was not really stiff in Noah's time. Others note that when all about you are losing their moral compasses and you follow yours, you deserve credit (Genesis Rabbah 30:9).

Feldman pushes us to think about the story from the perspective of those killed by the Flood. Surely there were righteous among them. Noah, secure in God's promise that he and his family will survive, does not challenge God's plan. As the text repeats four times, Noah did everything that God commanded him. Perhaps his post-Flood fall from grace can be traced to his unquestioning obedience and his inability to see the humanity of others.

As human beings, we all suffer from global warming, we all are possibly victims of nuclear warfare, we are all potential refugees. We ought not stand idly by, secure in our individual, communal, or even national arks while permitting others to suffer.

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נח תשע"ז



Building a Boat and a Tower

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Does it feel lately that the fate of the world is at stake? If so, the Torah seems intent to validate and deepen our concern. Here we are just days before one of the most disconcerting elections in American history, and we have also arrived at Parashat Noah, the original dystopian tale.

In fact, our Torah portion includes two dystopias, each of which relates to a distinct constellation of political fears. The first presents as a natural catastrophe—rising flood waters that will wipe out all human habitations on land—but which the Torah ascribes to the consequence of human irresponsibility. A flawed hero manages to salvage what can be saved and rebuild society, but only after it suffers grievous losses.

The second calamity is more of an imagined disaster than a present threat, one in which fear-driven policy leads to self-inflicted damage. The builders of the tower of Babel are terrified of being dispersed across the land and losing their identity. They respond by building a huge skyscraper to “make ourselves a name,” but are instead dispersed both physically and culturally, becoming estranged and distanced from one another.

It would be simplistic to draw an analogy between the two calamities of Parashat Noah and the two sets of fears expressed by our political parties. Still, it seems that Hillary Clinton voters are not infrequently concerned about calamities such as climate change, warfare, and failed economies—catastrophes that are caused or exacerbated by human misconduct and which have the capacity to destroy entire cities, if not nations. In this they are like Noah and his family. Donald Trump voters, on the other hand, resemble the builders of the tower. They are animated by fears of immigration and lost hegemony, both cultural and financial. They respond with support for a literal

tower builder whose famous name is their rallying point to strengthen and concentrate their cause.

The flood story is relatively unambiguous, despite being textually complex. Humanity has come to practice *hamas*, a Hebrew word meaning “violence.” This behavior so disgusts the Creator that God “regrets” making people, and resolves to start over with Noah and his family (Gen. 6:11-18). Noah is far from a perfect hero. He seems distant from others, both his family and his neighbors, and does not even attempt to argue with God or to build a coalition of the righteous to avert the calamity. He gets right to work on his ark project, immersing himself in the myriad details required to make it float, but fails to convince skeptics about the dangers or the decisions demanded to avert disaster. In the face of tremendous threats, Noah focuses on technical details, failing to reach the hearts of his potential audience. Is Noah a successful leader? Perhaps, but one wonders if greater success would have been possible with a less guarded persona and a more open style of communication.

What worries animate the tower builders? Is moving around the land such a bad thing? Didn't God command humanity to be fruitful and multiply, filling and even conquering the world? The ancient Rabbis understood that the tower builders intended no less than to displace God. In the Talmud (BT Sanhedrin 109a), Rabbi Nathan connects Genesis 11:4, “let us make a name for ourselves,” with Exodus 23:13, “Do not recite the name of other gods.” Just as one text refers to idolatry, so too does the other. This interpretation is offered in the names of different rabbis in midrashic sources. Tanhuma reports Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai's claim that the builders planned to place an idol on top of the tower to ward off any demands to be made of them by God. They were afraid, and used the idol for self-defense. A parallel tradition beginning with Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael explains that this tower project was all about arrogance. The people wished to make themselves rich and famous, but instead they were punished by becoming destitute refugees.

Medieval commentator Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra explains that the people of Babel sought to impress later generations with their accomplishments—what a great tower they had built! This yearning for greatness and reputation was also their undoing, leading them to precisely the

catastrophe that they most feared: dispersion, confusion, and lost hegemony.

Rabbi Shelomo Ephraim b. Luntshitz observes in his 17th century Bible commentary *Keli Yekar* that the building project was not inherently evil. Perhaps the people merely sought to prevent civil strife by expanding their city and making room for more residents? But when they stated, “let us make a name for ourselves,” they revealed their true motivations as being far more base: Fame and power were their ultimate goals, not peace and prosperity for all. And so they failed.

I expect that every reader of this commentary has her or his own understanding of both the portion and the current political climate. Perhaps we can nevertheless agree on a few things. First, no one looks great by the end of this portion. Second, fear makes for bad policy, whereas moral conduct is the ultimate ark for riding out a storm. If a society can identify its core values and take rational steps to address its challenges, then the end result can be noble strength rather than dissolution. Finally, arrogance undermines even good intentions. Building a tower is not inherently evil, but a constant concern with making one's name great will surely lead to ruin. Expanding the circle of responsibility and of reward is the way to avert the calamities understood by our ancestors and faced by us today.

Parashat Noah sweetens the acrid taste of its dual dystopias by introducing the family of Abram and Sarai at the end. They are exemplars of compassion, courage, and responsibility. May we deserve to have such leaders again, and may we each take responsibility for our future by supporting candidates who stand for moral values and effective policies.

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