

After the Flood

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As I write this, catastrophic flash floods are overwhelming regions of Nigeria and Australia. Closer to home, residents of Puerto Rico and Florida's Gulf Coast continue to recover from destructive hurricanes, while in Pakistan the 30 million displaced by floods earlier this year face significant food and medicine shortages. While not all extreme weather events can be attributed to human-driven climate change, scientists understand that the extremes of heat and rainfall which have become commonplace are caused by a warming planet and having devastating effects: creating climate refugees and putting lives at risk, particularly affecting children, the elderly, and communities of color.

Human beings have changed the Earth in such profound and dramatic ways that some geologists say we have entered a new epoch—the Anthropocene. While debate exists on when this new era began, there is strong support for the theory that the catalyst was industrialization and the introduction of a fossil-fuel economy in the eighteenth century. The ability of human activity to cause major geological and ecological change is, in this sense, uniquely modern.

Today it's common to find *divrei torah* that use Parashat Noah to raise awareness about our impact on the environment. Yet I recently discovered a voice from the first stirrings of modernity that seemed to already intuit, within a theological framework, the devastating impact of humans on the global environment. For Obadiah Sforno (1475–1550), the “lawlessness” during the days of Noah did not just cause God to flood to earth. It was a force capable of ruining the climate and planet, and thereby shaping the course of human history ever after.

It is perhaps no surprise that the Italian biblical commentator was preoccupied with the interrelated fates of humans and the planet. A scholar, physician, and philosopher, well-versed

in Jewish and secular knowledge, Sforno was active at the height of the Renaissance, a time of renewed engagement in the study of astronomy, anatomy, geography, and natural philosophy. This was, after all, the era of Copernicus and Galileo.

As the biblical text offers only few clues about specific causes and effects of the flood, the commentators step in to fill in the gaps. What was the source of human “lawlessness”? What did it mean for God to call for the destruction of all creation “*et ha'aretz*,” which could mean both “from” or “with” the earth” (Gen. 6:13)? Sforno understands God's words as follows:

I will destroy the climate which could support life on earth by interfering with the sun's orbit and rearranging it from the beginning of the deluge for the entire future This accounts for the lifespan of man having been drastically reduced after the deluge. The climate of the earth changed, there were greater extremes of heat and cold, the produce of the earth was considerably less capable of supporting a long lifespan. As a by-product of this deterioration in the quality of the vegetable products, man was allowed to eat meat as a compensation.

Elsewhere Sforno explains that after the flood, the sun's orbit of the Earth was no longer circular, but elliptical. (He has not fully integrated heliocentrism into his account.) Thus a climate that was once “an eternal spring” for the planet's populated regions was now characterized by uneven temperatures during different parts of the year: “Seedtime and harvest, Cold and heat, Summer and winter, Day and night” (Gen. 8:22). Sforno argues that these “rapid changes of climate have a deleterious effect on human health,”

accounting for the decline in longevity. That's why humans now live for mere decades instead of centuries. The flood takes us another step further away from the Edenic ideal. Only in the time of the messiah, as alluded to in the book of Isaiah, would the earth be restored.

The story of the flood thus explains both the spiritual and physical decline of humanity. Human sin causes natural disaster; natural disaster changes major aspects of the Earth's climate, the sun's orbit, the quality of its vegetation—and this in turn has disastrous consequences for humans. The moral decline of humanity and the physical deterioration of natural world (from vegetation to human bodies) are intertwined, part of the same tragic trajectory.

Sforno brings together religious and scientific thought to suggest that the flood's drastic alterations to the planet caused significant changes to human bodies, lives, and history that could only be rectified in some future time. The new extremes of weather and seasonality were a well-deserved punishment, given that our sins had sparked the flood in the first place.

There are clearly vast differences in how Sforno and we today understand the human contribution to a global climate catastrophe. And we are not content to imagine a return to Eden in some future utopian era, dependent on Divine rather than our own agency. Voices from today's Jewish and secular environmental movements call on us to do what we can to create a safe, stable world for all creation and to take discrete actions to create a sustainable economy and society. Yet I read his interpretation of the flood narrative as a profound expression of the idea that humans have the power to transform nature on a global scale and are, in turn, vulnerable to the consequences of those changes to the natural world. His commentary calls on us to see the world as a unified, interconnected whole and to act within it with this awareness in mind.