

Species Purity and the Great Flood



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Omnicide is a dramatic move, on that we can all agree. But what causes the Creator to grow violently disgusted with the creatures that had just recently been praised as “good” and blessed with fertility? JTS Bible Professor Emeritus Alan Cooper has [suggested](#) that it was interspecies breeding of human women with divine creatures that angered God, and that it was Noah’s pure genealogy (“perfect in his generations”) that set him apart for salvation. The ancient Rabbis had a similar idea—it was crossbreeding between species that angered God and caused God to reboot with specimens that were still arranged “according to their families” ([Gen. 8:19](#); see Midrash Tanhuma, Buber ed., Noah 11).

In the Talmud ([BT Sanhedrin 108a](#)), Rabbi Yohanan teaches that animals prior to the flood were mating not only across species but also across genera, and that humans were mating with “everyone.” This interspecies orgy was the “corruption of all flesh” ([Gen. 6:12](#)) that caused the Creator to destroy life on earth. The Torah’s orderly procession of animals into the ark “two by two,” emphasizes species differentiation, which the Bible apparently believes to be a priority of the Creator.

God is not alone in valuing species distinction. From early childhood a favorite learning activity for our children is to recognize types of animals, whether at the zoo, in picture books, or with dolls. I believe my daughter’s first “word,” in response to the question, “What does the bee say?” was an emphatic “Bzzz!” Just as God creates the world through a series of differentiations (between light and dark, land and sea, plants and animals, etc.), so too do our minds develop through exercises in differentiation. By sorting through stimuli and noticing patterns, the brain develops into an analytic powerhouse for life.

In its legal sections, the Torah depends upon the physical characteristics of various species to declare some pure, and others impure, with implications for the Israelite diet and sacrificial system. Moreover, [Leviticus 19:19](#) prohibits “mingling” (*kilayim*) of different species of plants and animals. Nahmanides observes that in creating artificial hybrids, humans undermine the natural order and impute deficiency in the Creator. Rabbinic law applies this ban to the grafting of one plant onto the rootstalk of another, and to the breeding of different animal species together. Mystical texts such as the Zohar see the blending of species as severing a link between heaven and earth, with potentially disastrous results (III: 86b).

What, however, if species distinction is just a crude and inaccurate attempt at freezing a fluid and dynamic reality? What is a species, anyway? That question, so obvious and clear to a child, turns out to be quite complicated for biologists, philosophers, and at least this rabbi. We may say that species are comprised of individuals that can reproduce together in nature, but as Darwin notes in the *Origin of Species*, hybrids occur naturally among plants and animals of different species. Despite persistent beliefs that hybrids are infertile, Darwin reports that this is just not true. Speciation is not a once and forever demarcation among the “kinds” of animals, but is rather a fluid and constant process of differentiation among organisms. Animals grow apart in their generations, and sometimes they blend back together, as has been observed with the mingling populations of gray wolves and eastern coyotes. Still, the overall effect has been a proliferation of diversity in life and a constant churning as some species grow extinct and others are established.

In the past decade, biologists have rapidly developed the field of epigenetics, studying the role of environment and

experience on the development of individuals. DNA essentialism has been exposed as an inaccurate oversimplification. You are not your genes, alone. To define species solely in terms of genetic inheritance is to miss the vast significance of nutrition, nurturing, and general experience in the essence of what makes each “type” of animal distinct. Such experiences affect not only the psychology of individuals, but also some of their physical attributes, and some such modifications may be inherited by the next generation.

Differentiation between species is often a useful exercise, and it is integral to the practice of mitzvot such as the *lulav* (with its “four species”), and *kashrut*. The Torah provides “signs” (*simanim*) for kosher creatures of the land and the sea, and these can be observed whether or not species themselves are a stable and universal phenomenon. The Bible’s recognition of specific species, and its prohibition of hybridization, may reflect a deep concern with the maintenance of order.

Still, there can be too much of a good thing. The Tower of Babel story ([Gen. 11:1–9](#)) may be a parable about the dark side of order. When humans all speak the same language, and cooperate perfectly as a united species, God grows concerned. The Torah doesn’t spell out why, but with our understanding of totalitarianism, we can appreciate the dangers of Babel. Large groups of people who speak with “one language” and prize their solidarity above other values may come to prey upon outsiders in order to validate their communal value. Perhaps this is why the Torah makes such a point of protecting “the stranger in your midst.” And perhaps this is why in our portion, the Creator decides that it is best for the humans to disperse and diversify. Instead of keeping the human species distinct in one location with one language, God varies their language and scatters them across the earth.

Parashat Noah is the Bible’s story about how civilization developed from a simple society to one that is complex, and from a centralized human settlement to a global presence. While the Creator initially favors order and simplicity, the blessing to “be fruitful and multiply” ultimately requires

complexity. For contemporary people too, simplicity can be seductive, but an honest and successful engagement with the world requires exploring it in all of its baffling and beautiful diversity.

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