

Noach: The Waters (Genesis 7:24–8:4)

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One of the reasons I love Genesis is because it's so grandiose. It's the Cecil B. DeMille book. The one with epic action. Sweeps of history that have become so entrenched in our minds that it's hard to remember when we didn't know these stories.

They're chapters with power and majesty. And unlike Leviticus (with its endless rules), or Deuteronomy (greatly reminders of books one through four), Genesis is stories with very simple and vivid moral lessons: Do evil and you will be punished. Or in this case, washed away.

Noah is described as the righteous man of his generation, the seed of history's future. But the *parshah* also reveals our essential humanness, our reflexive, stubborn, recidivist tendencies to being naughty, given half a chance. Hold that thought.

Virtually every culture has a flood story. I'm not much of a geologist or a Jungian. But the universal prevalence suggests there's either an archetypal message or one linked to the physical history of the planet. I assume you know the story, but here's the bones:

Noah's warned by God that everything's going to be washed away, and given very precise instructions about building an ark, collecting pairs of all the species (seven of the kosher ones, fewer of the rest). There's 40 days of rain, another 150 of being tossed around a sodden world, and then landing atop Ararat. Noah sends out a raven, then doves, to see when it's time to debark. After they unload he builds an altar and sacrifices in gratitude. God promises never again to so utterly destroy, and names the rainbow as a sign of the covenant. The rest I'll get to later.

What's going on beneath the plot?

Noah is about water, both literal and metaphorical. It's about healing. It's about hitting the reset button, internally and ex. About starting over in the most dramatic and simplest way: washing away everything that has been, and getting to, needing to, being in charge of rebuilding a better world. If you can cast yourself as Noah, it's somewhere between a fantasy and a nightmare.

Certainly each of us has longed for the opportunity to say, *Wait a minute. Can we replay* that last sentence, month, relationship, choice of any kind. What golfers call a mulligan and kids call a do-over. If you've never wished for one, you're in a small minority.

Noah acts it all out for us, on the biggest stage. Everything washed away, gone. Flooded into ancient history, until even history becomes myth. And The Flood, like the bedtime boogeyman hiding in your closet, is told to scare you into being good.

The letter in Hebrew associated with water is *mem*. The number associated with *mem* is 40. 40's a number we hear often in the Torah: in this *parshah*, in the desert, at Sinai, Jonah, and others. Each one a time of testing.

Within the repetition, I hear patterns the soul goes through. Echoes of our persistent attempts to change, when we keep trying to get something right. Where "something" lies somewhere between the personal and the cosmic. It can be our quest for love or a new jeans size, or for some form of social transformation.

What motivates you to start over? To relocate, to divorce, to change your career? To convert? Are you like God, ready to hit the reset button because a situation seems completely unredeemable? Or like Noah, doing what you need to do to stay alive, no matter how overwhelming the task seems to be?

Are you terrified? Excited? Doubtful? Optimistic? How do you deal with those feelings? Do you rant or cry, or quietly accept the inevitable? Do you listen to your inner voice (which is how I think God talks to us)? Or do you cower and hide?

How do you make your changes a conscious transformation? How do you help your soul do its work? Do you try to anticipate and control? Or do you trust with blind faith?

This *parshah* gives us great advice. Bring all the seeds you can find into your future. You'll need them to energize your new life. And like Noah counting up the species, inventory every aspect of self that you value, that you want to preserve.

No matter how you try, you're only human. You're gonna bring along the cockroaches as well as the deer. But perhaps we need them in our psychic ecosystems. Maybe we need those darker edges to push against. Taoist Judaism 101: there's no *yetzer tov* (the good inclination) without a *yetzer hara* (the evil one). There's always duality in the land of *Shema Yisrael*.

My favorite interpretation of the *Shema* goes roughly like this: *Listen up God-wrestler, it's all the same*. The world of spirit and the world of matter are all part of the same truth, and you're responsible for seeing and keeping it all together. For holding everything in the ark of your being, keeping the ship afloat until you reach dry land. For doing *tikkun olam* in a shattered world. Or in this case in this flooded one.

Just like Noah, we're adrift in our lifeboats of self. Floating along in the waters of change, with all the baggage we can fit, X cubits by Y. Though not as global, traumas in your own life can feel like The Flood. Loves wanted and wasted, parents dying, the end of a relationship or job, old friends who no longer share your values.

Noah mirrors the existential loneliness of life, and our unrelenting prayers for God to give us a sign that we're seen and heard.

One of my favorite movie images comes from a Steve Martin film. He's in an old ruined castle on a dark and stormy night. Lightning's flashing, thunder pounding. The pictures and the fireplace are spinning, and he's standing there shaking his fist at the sky, saying over and over, *Give me a sign! Give me a sign!*

Like Noah, all we're asking for is a little sprig of something green. Something to let us know that everything's going to be okay, no matter how much it's rained, no matter what's been washed away.

We're always going to carry nostalgia for the past and hope for the future. For old people or new places, new people or old places. That's part of being human. We come factory-equipped with memory and desire. They help us get through each day and each night. They're also what keep us from being fully integrated and fully present.

But they also inspire prayer. Prayer for something to show us that God still loves us. It's belief that a sign will eventually come that keeps us sending out the birds, and praying for their swift and omen-bearing return.

We're not always quite so good about being present. Especially when reality's not much fun, like being endlessly adrift in a ceaseless rain, lots of roaring and braying going on, from the animals and the relatives both, I imagine.

That rain also represents the flood of feeling that we carry within us. The emotional waters that mirror the water of our bodies, all 60 some percent of it that we are.

So much crying over what we've lost, what we don't have, what we fear we'll never see again. Until the dove comes back with that olive sprig and validates all the tears, all the hoping, and all the prayer.

L'chaim – there's gonna be new life! What a moment it must have been.

What fills the space after the water recedes, after you land in your own private Ararat -- your new city, job, or relationship? You're where you must make your new home. It might not be what you'd hoped for, but you have to make your peace with where you've landed.

So what's the first thing Noah does after God's promise that he's safe and sound? That there'll be no more catastrophes. He gets a drink. Not one of those eight glasses of water each day we're told will keep us healthy. He gets drunk, *bore puri hagofen*, fruit of the vine drunk.

So drunk that he passes out naked in his tent and has to be covered by kids. It's natural to want to chill after escaping danger – let alone being responsible for the preservation of all species. Human enough that we've all done it. Blotted out reality just when we should be most appreciative and most focused.

But like that stiff-necked crowd waiting a long 40 days at the base of Sinai, we're pretty adept at finding ways to hold God at bay. Look what happens to the generation after. They build Babel. And God, having forsworn wholesale destruction, tumbles it over like an overly ambitious Lego project, and then scatters them into seventy nations who can no longer easily communicate.

So how can we cope with our reflexive human need to screw up? Better to recognize our own failings than to get a swipe of the divine hand. But how do we get it right? How do we avoid repeating the cycle?

The classic answers: Torah, prayer, mitzvot. All very good and important. But what about the average Jew, the one who doesn't do 100 prayers a day? Start with the basics. Obey the 10 Commandments and work your way up.

And when you still screw up, as you inevitably will, remember that the waters of *mem* are more than a flood of tears or a flood of annihilation. They are also *Mayyim Hayyim*, the waters of life, the waters of the *mikveh*: the healing antidote to life's confusion and traumas.

Earlier this year, just before Passover, I *mikvehed* with my friend Johanna. I describe her as my *mikveh* sister, the person with whom I can share anything about myself, before whom I have no shame. Someone who can witness me naked before God. It's a wonderful ritual. I encourage you to try it. Thank you Libby and Joseph for creating such wonderful sacred space in our community.

In the *mikveh* waters, you immerse, you cleanse, and you are healed. You immerse fully three times: to release the burdens of the past, to release attachment to the future, and to embrace being fully in the present. To living with integrity, with trust, and with grace.

You can invite change into your life through the waters of destruction or through the waters of life. If you choose *mayyim hayyim*, you can emerge not just renewed, but reborn.

Shabbat shalom.