

When I read Parashat Noach, I often focus on the character of Noach, his morality and its limitations. But this week, this year, I was struck by a rather chilling coincidence. At the beginning of the parashah, when setting the scene for why Hashem decides to destroy all of humanity, chapter 6, verse 11, the third verse of the parashah teaches:

וַתִּשְׁחַת הָאָרֶץ לְפָנַי הָאֱ-לֹהִים וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ חָמָס :

“The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with *hamas*.”

Now, JPS translates *hamas* as “lawlessness.” Other translations render it as “violence” and Ibn Ezra explains that this is characterized by “Theft, oppression and taking women against their will.”

Two verses later, when Hashem instructs Noach to build the ark, the word shows up again: God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with *hamas* because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.” Hashem decides to utterly destroy the source of the *hamas*, and singles out the one family innocent of evil, and instructs them how to literally rise above the fate of everyone else.

This could be a set-up for a dvar Torah about how the only way to root out violent evil is to utterly destroy it. Surely, someone in the world is giving that dvar this Shabbat.

And that is certainly an understandable impulse. We learned last week that we are made in the image of Hashem, and one facet of Hashem is this: a sense of justice so fierce that it must destroy any place where injustice flourishes. As Jews, there is every reason for us to burn with that divine rage, not only at Hamas but at their apologists and celebrants. As Rabbi Sharon Brous drashed last week, “Our humble ask is that people give a damn when we die. It visits an additional anguish on our broken hearts when they do not.”¹

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFLvLETvP1A> at about 12 mins

And yet, this same Torah portion offers a caution on that fierce Divine impulse. Here are three observations:

First: even though Noach is innocent, and even though he survives, he is clearly traumatized by the experience of being the sole survivor of that destruction. Chapter 9, verse 20 says that Noach is the first to plant a vineyard and become drunk. He becomes so enraged at his son Ham for discovering him in his intoxicated state that he curses Ham and his descendants – a curse that was incidentally used to justify American slavery and racism for centuries. But that's another drash. My point here is that the lived experience of Noach seems to suggest that extreme violence doesn't just destroy its targets, it affects even those who witness it who were on the moral side.

Second: in only a few generations, humans are behaving badly again, with the idolatrous project of the tower of Babel. One midrash describes how the builders became so obsessed with their edifice that they mourned more when a brick fell than when a human fell and died.² These are descendants of the most righteous and innocent person on earth – yet after a few generations, they too are susceptible to disregarding humanity.

Third: God, Themselves, seem to conclude after the flood that total destruction is not a workable deterrent to bad human behavior. Chapter 8, verse 21 says, "Hashem resolved: 'Never again will I doom the earth because of humankind, since the devisings of the human mind are evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done.'"

² Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 24:6

Ultimately, God suggests that in the future, S/He will no longer attempt to sort humans into groupings of the good ones and the evil ones, because all of us have the capacity for evil within us. And it is not worth destroying the entire world in order to stamp that evil out. God will have to find another strategy to subdue the human impulse towards violence. Arguably all of Torah is the continuation of that experiment.

For now, for a safeguard, in Chapter 9, verses 11-15 Hashem tells Noach, “I will maintain My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. . .

This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come.

I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.

When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds,

I will remember My covenant between Me and you and every living creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.”

Rabbi Avital Hochstein notes the shift in perspective between Hashem’s two quotes, writing, “...the major transition from God’s statement to Himself to God’s covenant with the world is a shift in blame. When God speaks to Himself, God blames humanity for being inclined towards evil. On the other hand, when God constructs the covenant, He acknowledges His extreme reaction to evil. God complains to Himself about humanity’s nature, and God makes promises to Humanity about God’s own behavior.”³

³ <https://www.hartman.org.il/noah-the-first-covenant-in-tanakh/>

Rabbi Hochstein also notes that the rainbow is less of a sign for humans than a reminder to God, adding “It’s necessary, ostensibly, because the God of the covenant of *Parashat Noah* recognizes His own character traits in the rainbow and is reminded of them when the rainbow is present. These characteristics, as they are presented to us, the biblical readers, include disappointment and sadness that could theoretically result in an extreme act of destruction, in a flood.

Therefore, the content of the covenant is based on a deep understanding of these character traits and it functions as a recognition of them and as a resolution taken to allow the relationship to continue, to enable the continuation of a life together.”

I want to be clear here that I am not equivocating on the evil of Hamas, or on the morality of attempting to destroy Hamas (the organization). I am commenting on strategic limitations of a vision of wiping out evil – and I am asking about what comes after that effort. This parshah is offering a perspective that the desire to wipe out evil is not only understandable, it is Divine. AND God knows (literally) that ultimately, it doesn’t work. Evil exists in our own hearts, and ultimately, the survivors of violence will themselves do violence, unless we can find a different way.

Right now, perhaps, we are in a time of flood. I do not know how long it will last. But I am sure that on the other side, there will be survivors, traumatized, and the impulse in the human heart that leads to *hamas* – by any definition – will not have been wiped out. So it will be upon all of us to seek a new way forward, a rainbow covenant.