

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה לב

ד"א ויהי לשבעת הימים א"ר יהושע בן לוי ז' ימים נתבל הקב"ה על עולמו קודם שיבא מבול לעולם, מאי טעמא ויתעצב אל לבו ואין עציבה אלא אבילות, שנאמר (שמואל ב ט) נעצב המלך על בנו.

Another interpretation of “And on the seventh day the waters of the Flood came upon the earth” (Gen. 7:10):

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Seven days the Holy One, Blessed be He, mourned for His world before bringing the flood, the proof being the text, “And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened” (Gen. 6:6).

And still another:

“And the victory that day was turned into mourning unto all the people; for the people heard say that day: ‘The king grieves for his son’” (II Sam. 19:3).

I am so glad that the Rabbis imagined God as in mourning.

The Flood story, after all, raises the two most theologically difficult questions of all: How can we believe in God when we live through horrible natural disasters? Wouldn't the God we believe in, the God we would like to believe in, have created a different natural order, one in which there were no monsoons, tsunamis, earthquakes, or hurricanes?

The comparison of God to King David is a bold and imaginative answer to these challenges. David's son Absalom is trouble: he murders David's other son (Absalom's half-brother), goes into hiding for three years, and returns to mount a successful insurrection which overthrows David from the throne. David is forced to flee from Jerusalem and, in the battle waged to restore his rule, Absalom—against the explicit orders of David to his generals—is brutally killed. David's response is one of total grief. As II Samuel 19:3 reads: “The victory that day was turned into mourning unto all the people, for the people heard say that day: ‘The king grieves for his son.’”

The wordplay here is on the verb translated as *grieves*: נעצב. The root is the very one that appears in the Genesis text, describing God's heart as *saddened*: ויתעצב. The coincidence enables Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi—and us—to imagine God mourning for Creation that is now doomed to die. Just as David knew that he had to go to battle with his son's army, and that his wayward son would almost certainly be killed, God knows that S/he must destroy nearly the entire world. And just as David grieves for his son, despite his rebellious ways, so too God grieves for plant, animal, and human life, despite their corruption.

The image of a mournful God is, for me at least, a helpful one. We know the emotional value of a seven day period of mourning in which to come to terms with our loss, and the idea of God “sitting shiv'ah” for the losses of the Flood invites us to imagine a God whose being is complicated and nuanced. It also invites us to imagine the characters on the Ark in a new light. That week of waiting for the rains to begin, in which they are shut up in the Ark per God's instructions (Gen. 7:4), becomes a week in which Noah and his family, and the animals too, are sitting shiv'ah with God. It is a week in which they too can begin to come to terms with their losses, and with the impending death of friends and extended family who were not given a berth on the Ark. And then, having sat shiv'ah before the rains began, the forty days and nights of the Flood take God and Noah and his family through *shloshim* and a little bit beyond so that, by the time the dove flies in bearing its olive branch, all of the characters have moved from grief to acceptance, ready to leave the Ark and get on with their lives.

The God in which this midrash invites us to believe is not a cruel and vengeful God. This God is a God torn between love and duty, between justice and mercy. It is a God whose essence appears to mirror our own ambivalence and complexity; a God in whose Image I can imagine us all being created.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat No-ah
Genesis 6:9–11:32
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Parashah Commentary

This commentary was written by Dr. David Kraemer, Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Librarian and professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS

Read the Noah story—the whole thing, from the very end of Genesis 5 and not just from the beginning of the parashah—and you will immediately sense that there is a problem. Why are there so many repetitions, tensions, and outright contradictions? Why are we told twice about Noah's offspring (5:32 and 6:10)? Why does the story offer two explanations for God's decision to destroy all creatures, removing them from the face of the earth—one explanation relating to the transgression of the divine/human divide and the wickedness of the human heart (6:1–7), and the other relating to human violence (6:11–12)? And why, in almost a single breath, does the Torah contradict its own representation of God's command to bring animals onto the ark, first requiring two of every species (6:19) and then requiring seven of each pure species and only two of each impure species (7:2–3)?

These are the problems that made the Noah story one of the primary foundations of the so-called Documentary Hypothesis of biblical origins. In fact, if you divide the story according to the name of God used in each part (Elohim [E] or Jahweh [J]), you will find that the division produces two neat and almost complete stories, each with its distinct version of the Noah tradition. For this reason, many modern critical readers of the text have concluded that what we have here is two original documents (E and J) combined to create a larger whole, but with relative disregard for the issues their combination creates. To be sure, dividing the story eliminates the problems exemplified in the paragraph above, but it does nothing to make sense of the Torah's story as we have it, whatever its origins.

In the world before the invention of the printing press, a world that was largely illiterate, the tensions and even contradictions we see today when reading the Torah's text would mostly not have been a problem. When people experience a text orally and aurally—read out loud by a reader whose words they hear but do not see—they tend not to hear tensions or even contradictions, and they certainly cannot go back to compare what they hear now to what they heard before. Consequently, they tend to modify their memory or understanding of the earlier in light of the latter. Repetitions are assumed to be there for emphasis or simply because orality demands repetition for clarity, and tensions or contradictions are smoothed over without the listener even being aware that a problem was there to be solved. In the world where people heard but did not read the Torah, our Genesis 2 (the “second Creation story”) would have been heard as a

specification or filling out of Genesis 1 (our “first Creation story”), and the Noah story would have been worked out with similar lack of difficulty.

This does not mean, however, that the difficulties do not exist, and we as *readers* should pay attention to them. I would like to suggest that the Documentary solution provides us with an important key, but not because separating the stories solves the readers’ problems. When we read the part of the story in which God is referred to by the *J* name and compare it with the part of the story in which God is known by the *E* name, we find that the two strands offer us two very different pictures of who God is and the nature of God’s relationship with humanity. First separated and then combined, these two parts offer us, in the end, a very complex theology, one from which we can all learn.

In the *J* story, God wants to protect God’s status vis-à-vis human beings and other creatures. It is in this story that the “divine beings” sleep with human women, provoking God’s wrath. One expression of God’s wrath is to limit the length of human life to one-hundred and twenty years, ensuring a clear distinction between humans and divine beings who live forever. It is in this story that God requires Noah to bring onto the ark seven of every pure animal, because it is in this story that God will demand animal sacrifices of Noah when he emerges from the ark. The God of the *J* story is appeased by the sweet smell of the sacrifices, because they are an expression of human subservience and obedience. All told, this is a God who demands a clearly superior position with relation to God’s creation; the Supreme King to whom all creatures are radically subjects.

The God of the *E* story is portrayed very differently. The sin that this God sees is human violence; being concerned for human welfare, this God acts against that violence, but S/he never limits the length of human life (this God requires no such radical division between God and humans). This God requires only two of each species—male and female—to board the ark, because S/he will not demand sacrifices; the animals are needed only to perpetuate their species. Instead of demanding sacrifices upon Noah’s exit from the ark, the God of the *E* story begins by blessing the humans, and then gives them laws. The most important of these laws is the one that protects human life.

Crucially, the God of *E* then goes on at length to express God’s covenantal commitment to humanity, ensuring that flesh will never again be destroyed by a flood. The fact that this commitment is covenantal—the word covenant (*brit*) appears in this context (9:8–17) seven times!—is significant. A covenant is a contract, one in which two parties commit to one another by mutual agreement. The fact that this God can enter a covenant with humanity means that S/he views humanity as a worthy partner, not necessarily an equal but also not a radically submissive subject to be commanded and little more.

These are two very different Gods, one jealous and superior, the other caring and available for relationship. How could they have been put together? What is the meaning of the two when represented as one? The answer, I think, lies in our own need for different Gods or, to be more correct, for one God differently imagined. My guess is that most of us are more immediately and naturally attracted to the God of *E*, the one who respects us enough to make a covenant with us. But such a God would be only partial. We also need a God—the God of *J*—who is radically superior, one totally unlike us, one to whom we can submit. Perhaps better expressed, sometimes we need the God as represented in one of these stories, at other times the God represented in the other. Put together, as in the Noah story, we have a fuller God, one we can address in all of our complexity, even if God is, in reality, much simpler (i.e., more singular) than these stories express.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Genesis 6:13 God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with earth.”

Joseph B’khor Shor, “I am about to destroy them with earth,” They destroyed their way and now I will destroy them. For I will destroy with them all the cattle and animals, birds and trees and vegetation, and everything that is upon the earth. For it is all corrupted by violence and all of it was created for them.

Numerous commentators of Torah have underscored the extent to which the flood of this week’s parashah represents the undoing of Creation. Only six chapters earlier, God created a magnificent world—imposing order on seemingly primordial chaos—and appointed humans as the caretakers of the earth. Subsequently, the divine plan goes awry as Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden; Cain murders his brother, Abel; and then divine beings cohabit with the daughters of men. This is clearly not the world intended by God. The crescendo of destruction, however, is triggered by Torah’s comment that “the Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5). How does God come to the fateful decision to destroy mankind and indeed all of Creation? Why begin anew?

Joseph B’khor Shor inspires serious philosophical introspection in this direction. Basing his comments on the verse which comes immediately before God’s announcement to Noah (Gen. 6:12), he explains that we are witness to an example of justice meted out “measure for measure.” Because “all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth,” God unravels the creative act. Humans, through their debased behavior, destroyed the boundaries imposed by God. Accordingly, God responds by destroying the boundaries set over the six days of Creation and the waters of destruction are unleashed on humanity. Emil Fackenheim argues that it is the response from below that calls forth the response from above. For good and for bad, this is certainly the case.

More than that, Joseph B’khor Shor takes his commentary a step further. Far from acquiescing in the face of this brutal divine punishment, the B’khor Shor wrestles, asking implicitly, “Why does God destroy the animals and entire earth as well? Would not it have been sufficient simply to punish humanity?” For that reason, he explains that all of Creation was fashioned in service of humanity. And since it was created for man, it too is destined for destruction. The message is clear: we share the same fate as animals and the environment; and, clearly, animals and the environment are influenced by our behavior. If, ultimately, Torah teaches us anything, it conveys the message of interdependence. We, animals and humans, are dependent on each other on earth; we, God and humans, are dependent on each other in the heavens above and the earth below. May we, as Noah, be blessed with receding waters of chaos in our time, learning to plant and renew in harmony with the divine plan.

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