

## Wallowers and Rebounders – Parashat Noah

This morning I'd like to describe two different individuals to you. See if you can recognize them and think of their names, because I'm pretty sure you know them both.

Our first is a man who does his best to live a good, decent life in a world that seems to be spiraling out of control. He constantly witnesses greed, oppression and violence. People around him are breaking laws, acting out sexually, stealing from each other, and even committing murder. This man steers clear of such behavior. Eventually, his neighbors are brought to justice and the man begins a new life unencumbered by such influences. Tragically, he turns to alcohol and never pulls himself up from his troubled beginnings.

The second man is born into a comfortable life, accumulates considerable wealth, and relocates to a new country. Then a terrible famine strikes and the man struggles to survive before being caught in a series of military conflicts with neighboring nations. He marries, but is unable to father children for many years, and he and his wife face multiple hardships and dangers. Eventually he has two sons, one who becomes estranged from him and one who nearly dies an early and tragic death. In time, this man becomes a respected leader within the community.

So, who are these two men? The first is the Biblical figure of Noah whose story we read today. Born into a generation filled with sinners, Noah is given the opportunity to save himself and his family by building an ark and inaugurating life on earth anew after the waters of the flood recede. Yet the evil environment into which Noah is born takes its toll on the man. While Noah obediently follows the Divine instruction to the letter and ensconces his wife and children in the ark's sturdy protection, he lacks imagination and courage to speak out for the other innocent people of his community, leaving

them instead to perish. And once the tragedy of the flood has passed, Noah immediately plants a vineyard and becomes drunk, self-medicating his sorrows away. Noah's focus is narrow, perhaps even selfish, and he is ultimately unable to lift either himself or his neighbors from destruction. Noah may survive the flood, but he never really thrives.

The second man is the Biblical figure of Abraham whose life, too, is filled with many trials and tribulations. He is forced to leave home at an early age, fights with his nephew, Lot, struggles with infertility, has relations with two different women who cannot abide one another, nearly sacrifices his beloved son at God's command, and so much more. Yet unlike Noah, Abraham's experiences seem to fill him with increased empathy and moral vision. Rather than looking to protect only himself, Abraham is genuinely troubled by the strife between his two wives and famously advocates for the people of Sodom and Gemorrah; he cares not only but his own but also about humanity as a whole. Abraham's focus is expansive, perhaps even generous, and he is ultimately able to transcend his circumstances and create a lasting legacy for both his family and the entire Israelite people. His challenges become a source of strength rather than a liability.

I wish to thank my colleague, Rabbi Lauren Werber, whose words and ideas shaped a large part of this sermon<sup>1</sup>, and I also wish to thank her for introducing me to journalist Rick Newman, author of the book Rebounders: How Winners Pivot from Setback to Success. As Newman writes, "Setbacks happen. Mistakes are unavoidable. And failing stinks. But here's the good news: Amazing success is often achieved by people who once fell flat on their faces."<sup>2</sup> Newman then goes on to describe some of the characteristics that lead people to "fail well" versus those that cause people to become paralyzed by

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<sup>1</sup> <https://americanrabbi.com/rebounding-in-the-new-year-by-lauren-werber/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://rickjnewman.com/rebounders/>

defeat. He concludes that it is not struggle (or lack thereof) that tends to define achievement and growth but rather the meaning that individuals are able to draw from pivotal challenging experiences.

In Newman's words, Noah would be what is called a "wallower" – someone who becomes stuck in adversity, blaming others for failure, complaining about his circumstances, avoiding risk-taking action, adopting rigid thinking, and failing to learn from mistakes. Noah did exactly what he was asked to do and nothing more; he was not daring enough to challenge God's plan or to agitate in support of his neighbors. When his son, Ham, took advantage of his drunken nakedness, Noah blamed the entire episode on the child rather than examining his own poor choices and behavior, cursing the boy and making him slave to his brothers. As Chief Rabbi of England, Lord Jonathan Sacks, writes, "Abraham might have failed [ in his attempts to save other people], but Noah...did not even try...[His] end – drunk, disheveled, an embarrassment to his children – eloquently tells us that if you save yourself while doing nothing to save the world, you do not even save yourself."<sup>3</sup> Noah may literally have overcome the waters of the flood, but he ends up drowning anyway – brought down by his own self-centeredness and lack of vision. He wallows in a life of defeat.

Abraham, on the other hand, is what Newman would call a "rebounder" – someone who embraces failure and learns from it, claims responsibility for her decisions, lets go of counter-productive emotions, and takes action even when there is risk involved. Abraham is surely not perfect and we wonder at his lack of voice when it comes to saving Isaac at the moment of the Akkedah or his ability to send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, away from the only home the child has ever known. Yet, Abraham is also the one who says to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me" (Genesis 14:8), allowing his nephew to select the choicest land for pasturing; the one who is described as "distressed" over Sarah's

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Covenant and Conversation, p. 46-47

harsh treatment of Ishmael, only agreeing to send him off once God commands him to do so; the one who famously petitions the Divine saying, “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty!...Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Genesis 18:25).

Abraham knows what it is to experience great pain and so wishes to prevent others from knowing a similar sorrow; he is sure enough in himself to be willing to risk confronting even the Almighty God when he sees wrong being done. Abraham does not blame or become overtaken by strong emotion or implode under the weight of some of his lesser choices; he instead plows ahead on his path with strength and purpose. He is able to rebound from the difficult circumstances of his life.

How do we become better at rebounding? And what can the stories of these two important men, along with so many others captured in the pages of Torah, teach us about learning from the challenging experiences in our lives?

In many ways, the notion of rebounding is at the center of the Jewish narrative, encapsulated in our very name, *Yisrael*, the one who struggles. We are the nomads who were enslaved in Egypt only to go on and inherit a Law based on freedom; the nation that was exiled and dispersed across the world only to go on and create a tradition based on community; the people who saw fully 1/3 of our population exterminated in Nazi Germany only to go on and re-build families that affirmed both life and continuity. For 2,000 years we yearned for an unlikely return to our land that, against all likelihood, miraculously came to be. Time and time again we have overcome improbable odds, over-sized enemies, and seemingly hopeless situations to rebound in strength rather than to wallow.

For many of us personally, there are also situations in our lives that force us to make the important choice between wallowing and rebounding. As Rabbi Werber writes, “We may be knocked down by

things like illness, death of a loved-one, family tensions, job insecurity or loss, financial hardship, or regret. Or, our challenges may stem from our childhoods or from various [other] types of injustice. Whatever the cause, when we realize that we are down, we choose whether to get up and how to do so. As the book of Proverbs teaches, ‘A righteous person falls seven times and rises up again.’ Sometimes we fall an eighth time, too.’<sup>4</sup>

If we are to choose to be rebounders, we can learn from some of the lessons of Noah and Abraham, some of the lessons that Newman catalogues in his book. We can accept responsibility for the things under our control rather than blaming others, and we can let go of toxic emotions like anger or resentment that tend only to drain us of energy. We can muster up our courage and dare to do the things, however difficult, that might lead to true change and success. We can analyze our failures and take from them wisdom so that we don’t make the same mistakes twice. We can look beyond our own self-interest and experience and try to raise others alongside of us.

I close this morning with a midrash (rabbinic story) that again compares the figures of Noah and Abraham, this time seizing upon a discrepancy in the way that each man is said to have walked vis-à-vis the Divine. While Genesis 6:9 describes that “Noah walked with God,” Genesis 17:1 explains that God told Abraham, “Walk before Me.” The rabbis explain that Noah may have been invited into God’s inner-circle, as it were, walking alongside the Divine, but this pales in comparison to Abraham who was of so much merit that he actually walked in front of God and led the way. As the midrash reads: “To whom may Abraham be compared? To a king’s friend who saw the king walking through a dark alleyway. His friend seeking him began to show him a light through the window. When the king looked up and saw him he said to him: before you give me light through the window come and give light in front of me.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://americanrabbi.com/rebounding-in-the-new-year-by-lauren-werber/>

Thus said the Holy One blessed be God: before you give light for Me in Mesopotamia and its neighbors, come and give light before Me in the land of Israel.”<sup>5</sup> While Noah was simply a follower, Abraham led the way for both God and humanity.

I find it wholly appropriate that the rabbis of the midrash use the metaphor of “giving light” in describing Abraham’s special gift to the world. Indeed, that was part of Abraham’s great genius – he was able to take experiences of darkness and transform them into radiance and bright. He was, perhaps, our world’s first rebounder.

May the sacred stories of Noah and Abraham inspire us, too, to rebound rather than to wallow when faced with life’s obstacles!

Shabbat Shalom.

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<sup>5</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 30:10

