

Today's parsha, Noach, is the second Torah portion of the new year. It includes many well-known Bible stories, but because these stories occurred long before Judaism began, versions of them exist in many different religions. Whether fact, myth or metaphor, the occurrence of a great flood was told by many diverse ancient cultures, with details that coincide with the biblical version. According to our Jewish timeline, Noach takes place about 4000 years ago, or about 1,600 years after Creation

Today's parsha begins with the words "This is the line of Noah ...and pretty much ends with the words "This is the line of Shem". Shem is the eldest of Noah's three sons. The parsha concludes with a description of sons begetting sons through nine generations of Shem's family, culminating in the birth of Avram, our first forefather. Between the generation of Noah and Abraham, many monumental will events occur: G-d will decide to bring about a torrential downpour of 40 days and nights as a solution to the massive lawlessness and corruption He sees on earth, He will choose one righteous man through whom all of humanity will continue. He will promise to never again destroy the earth by flood. He will change the languages of many people and scatter them all over the earth.

At the time of the flood, Captain Noah is 600 years old. Three hundred and fifty years after the flood, at the age of 950, he dies. The generations go by more quickly now because one of the things G-d also does in his disappointment with humanity is to shorten the human lifespan to about *one hundred and twenty years*. All of the people of the earth will now be descendants of Noah's sons. Ham has a son named Caanan who will father the Canaanite people. The line of Ham and his descendants, cursed by Noah due to immoral conduct, includes the wicked Nimrod, whose story is told at the end of today's parsha. Nimrod is responsible for the building of the Tower of Babel. So in this parsha, unfortunately, humanity comes full circle. It begins with the hope that a new people will be better, but once again a selfish and evil humanity performs an act that disrespects G-d and ends in destruction and confusion.

This is a brief summary of the parsha. In commenting on it, I would like to touch on three ideas: What it might have been like to be Noah, how the events of this parsha may have looked from G-d's point of view, and, how a deeper understanding of today's reading may help us to live richer lives in the calendar year 2014, aka 5775.

Let's begin with Noah...

One night this week, as I was trying to fall sleep but experiencing overactive-mind syndrome, I began thinking about how popular and diverse Noah actually is based on the many movies that have been made about his life. Naturally I jumped out of bed to see what Wikipedia had to say about this and it turned out to be pretty interesting. A surprising number of Noah movies that have been produced, each a multi-million dollar representation of how someone envisioned Noah to be. As a result, some of us may picture Noah as the benevolent Evan Almighty of 2007, an overwhelmed but likeable Steve Carrel. If you saw Noah in 2013, you may picture him looking and behaving more like Russell Crowe. His was a well-meaning but intense and deeply flawed Noah in what was advertised as “an epic story of courage, sacrifice and hope”. Actually, when Stuart asked me to give the D’var Torah today we both said *not the Russell Crowe version*, because we found many aspects of the script to be ridiculous, but it does depict a bizarre adventure in an extremely chaotic time, which is exactly what the story of the flood is. The real Noah, righteous though he may have been, was not without significant demons and flaws. Personally, though, I thought Russell was better cast as a gladiator.

My on-line research revealed an enormous Hollywood investment in this Bible story. Many retellings, many genres...drama, comedy, parody, adventure, animation, metaphor...and many Noahs. The first Noah’s Ark was released in 1928 and the massive amount of water needed to create the flood scenes resulted 3 deaths and many injuries. The film was re-released in 1957 as a silent film with narration. In 1933 we receive “Father Noah’s Ark”, starred an actor we never heard of. John Huston directed a movie in 1966 in which he also portrayed Noah. Did you know the Pomp and Circumstance scene in Fantasia 2000 is an animated depiction of the flood story? Or that Jon Voight was Noah in a 1999 Miniseries? In 2007, an animated film told the story of Noah’s Ark from the point of view of the animals. In 2012 Michael Keaton gave voice to another animated version. Even Tony Danza was Noah in a made for TV movie! And scheduled to be released in 2016 is a new animated adventure directed by John Stevenson, the director of Kung Fu Panda. Also told from the animals’ perspective, Noah will this time be an outcast aardvark by the name of Gilbert, who becomes the reluctant leader of a ragtag group of misfit animals he must be lead to the mighty ark before the impending flood. Clearly, is there is a continued fascination with this bible story that keeps it from becoming a piece of ancient history.

Today’s parsha tells us G-d chose Noah because in the midst of a lawless and morally bankrupt civilization, *Noah was a righteous man*, or, more accurately, THE righteous man. The Torah describes Noah as “*blameless in his age*”, a man who “*walks with G-d*”. Yet the commentaries offer mixed reviews of his righteousness. A discussion of this is recorded in the Talmud. Rabbi Jochanan said

the Torah means “Noah is only blameless in *his* age which was so depraved that in *other* ages he would not have been considered righteous.” In contrast, the Torah scholar Resh Lakesh said what is meant is that “Noah was righteous *even* in his age”, suggesting Noah is due special homage, for nothing is more difficult than to be honest and peaceful when deceit, violence and hatred are the accepted milieu of the day. Noah is a complicated figure and he is very much human. He is stubborn, drinks too much, and ends up blessing two of his sons but cursing the third, due to vaguely described deviant behavior on both of their parts. But we have to think G-d looks with a more discerning eye, and that whatever he needed and wanted He saw in this man. Maybe Noah was the world’s greatest carpenter, maybe he was the Dr. Dolittle of his day. Maybe he was just the right combination of righteous, humble, and human. I imagine him as brave, committed, and rather insane. Yet G-d told him to do a pretty massive, way “out there” kind of job, and, after a reasonable amount of soul-searching, he did it. As a good man, he must have felt torn over the fate of his neighbors, warning them of the flood and urging them to repent, though they didn’t listen. There is a children’s story collection called *Does G-d have a Big Toe?*, which tells the brutal story so sweetly...as the Ark closes and the deluge begins the others call to Noah saying (and I quote), “*Noah, you rat, let us in! We’re your friends! You can’t float off and leave us here to drown*”. *Noah looks down with tears in his eyes and says “My dear friends, I don’t know how I can live without you. The world was not this bad when G-d gave it to us. I don’t know why G-d is saving me. All I know is that I didn’t pick me. G-d picked me. I will remember you always. And I will tell the story of how to live in the right way. The story we were taught but forgot”* (end of quote). I imagine if I were Noah I would have felt much this way. It’s easy to forget that all the Bible’s bigger than life protagonists- Moses, Abraham, Noah...were human beings, just like us, complying with the commands of a monumental and awe-inspiring force, carrying out acts for which *we* would never want to be responsible. Maybe the flood happened and maybe it didn’t, or maybe it was an embellished natural event of the day, but it was written into the Torah to teach us lessons: Be good people, or suffer the consequences! Sometimes things get so bad, we have to end them and start again from scratch! In any case, Noah is a fascinating biblical character, an enduring story, and a reoccurring Hollywood theme.

Now let’s shift our attention to G-d...

Of course we cannot begin to fathom G-d’s “thoughts” or “feelings”, but let’s imagine for a moment that this is possible and look at some clues. Scholars have concluded that several strands of written history are woven together to create the Torah that we read. Said another way, an interpretation of the Noah story in one version of the Torah may simply include facts and details, while another version may

address G-d's feelings. In our own Atz Chaym, G-d is given human emotions. Today we read "*The Lord saw man's wickedness and He regretted that he had made him. The Lord's heart was saddened.*" Not "hardened", not angered, but saddened. The last sentence in the children's story which I quoted earlier says "*Then the rains came and flooded all the earth. Some say it was just rain, but others say that it was G-d's tears.*" G-d has created people out of His love, and then one day, like a disappointed father, He looks at his children and realizes they have become irrevocably spoiled, so much so that the only thing to be done is to destroy them all and re-people the earth once again with the family of Noah. But we also note that Midrash does not only depict the flood story as punishment. Another interpretation is that the flood was a purification...much like the waters of the mikvah, a chance to be cleansed and begin again. Isn't this the message of the rainbow...that no matter how "dark" the days have been, a brighter and better day is surely ahead. Mishnah teaches the rainbow is more than God's reminder to us that He will never again destroy the earth by flood. It is also God's reminder to Himself not to expect perfection of us...for we are only human, inclined to behave badly. In the parsha, G-d's words are "*When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures.*" He does not say you will see it and remember, He says *I will see it* and remember. The rainbow will in a reminder to G-d that no matter how off the mark we humans may stray, He will always give us another chance to do better. Frankly, it seems to me at times that the world may be broken beyond repair...the social, economic, medical, moral and environmental issues we face are daunting. While the rainbow is G-d's promise to never again destroy the world. I am sometimes not so sure we won't destroy it ourselves. But then I remember Judaism is about light, hope, and miracles, and I can take a breath and try again to do my small part to make things better.

In today's Torah reading, immediately after the flood, G-d redirects humankind toward righteousness by giving the people rules. He sets forth laws, known as the Noahide mitzvot, and these include the establishment of courts of law. Later these laws will be embedded in the 613 commandments given to the "*children of Israel*" at Mt. Sinai. But according to Talmud, these first 7 laws, are given by God as a binding set of laws to the "*children of Noah*", which is to say to *all humankind*. Therefore, Torah scholars assert that non-Jews who adhere to these laws are regarded as righteous gentiles, and they too are assured of a place in the world to come.

So what are the messages of this parsha?

How can we contribute to a world that makes G-d proud, that will not only endure but be a healthy place for us and children's children? I think we can start by appreciating the

beauty around us and striving to preserve it, and by noticing the suffering around us and trying to alleviate it. We remember Zusha's story: At the end of his life when called upon to account for his accomplishments, Zusha does not fear having to explain to G-d why he was not as awesome as Moses or Abraham. *He fears not being able to say he was the best possible Zusha.* To modernize a bit, the late Ken Venturi, a professional US golfer and broadcaster, once said "I don't believe you have to be better than everybody else. *I believe you have to be better than you ever thought you could be.*" This means striving every day to be a little better than the day before...to surprise even ourselves with what we can accomplish and become. We will all make mistakes, but if we have a commitment to learning from them and changing, we will grow. No age is too old to begin. Rabbi Kushner's popular book, "How Good Do We Have To Be?" encourages us to put our human feelings of guilt and inadequacy into perspective – so that we may accept ourselves and others, even when we are all less than perfect.

One of the many things I love most about Judaism is that we are not asked to be good in order to please a punishing G-d. We are asked to be generous and kind to make life better for others and to be happy with ourselves. Our faith teaches us to live in such a way by day that we can sleep untroubled at night. We follow the law because it is a counteragent to carelessness, harm, and immorality. Sometimes we do the right thing and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we are our best selves and sometimes our worst. But as long as we have breath, there is always a chance for us to try again, the ultimate moral of parsha Noah.

I will conclude with a true story I promised myself I would somehow fit into this D'var Torah. Recently, seven CBS congregants (including me) went to Napa for four whirlwind days of fun. With limited time and funds, we chose our activities very carefully. One place we thought we wanted to see, but quickly decided against once we got there, was a small geyser called Old Faithful (probably named for its big brother in Yellowstone). Let's just say it looked a lot better in the brochure than up close and personal, and no one wanted to spend what it cost to watch it spew. However, before we left the place, we took a group selfie in front of a *poster* of the geyser. Somehow the extraordinary Randy San Antonio, used his beloved photo-shop program to make us look exactly like we were right there, experiencing the real deal, having a great time. And in fact we have since declared that geyser one of the most fun experiences we *never had!* The reason I'm telling you all this is because to make the picture even more special, and a whole lot funnier, Randy inserted a beautiful rainbow right over our seven heads, proving, if you need a rainbow ending, sometimes you just have to add it in yourself.

We all have many rainbows, though we don't always see them as such. It may be the A on the top of the term paper after lots of hard work, the daughter under the Chupah it took years to nurture to that moment, the finish line of the race you never thought you could run. I think words like "second chance", "I still love you" and "virus-free" are rainbows too, the reward and the hope at the end of a trying time. When we surpass our

own expectations, there will most certainly be wonderful consequences ahead. May we recognize our own rainbows and be proud of ourselves when we find them. May we leave for our children a better world of righteousness, hope and peace.