

And God Remembered – Parashat Noach 5781

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*“And when the waters had swelled on the earth one hundred and fifty days, va-yizkor Elohim et Noah, God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided.”*

What did God remember? Why did God act to end the flood?

In the commentary in *Etz Hayim*, Nahum Sarna says that “‘To remember’ in the Bible is not to return or recall a mental image. It is to focus on the object of memory that results in action.” To remember is to be prompted to act. The opposite of “remember” is not “forget.” The opposite of “remember” is “do nothing.” God saw something that prompted action. And what?

Maybe God saw that things were getting out of hand. I’m reading from the text:

The Flood continued forty days on the earth, and the waters increased and raised the ark so that it rose above the earth. The waters swelled and increased **greatly** upon the earth, and the ark drifted upon the waters. When the waters had swelled **much more** upon the earth, all the highest mountains everywhere under the sky were covered. Fifteen cubits **higher** did the waters swell, as the mountains were covered. And all flesh that stirred on earth perished – birds, cattle, beasts, and all the things that swarmed upon the earth, and all humankind. All in whose nostrils was the merest breath of life, all that was on dry land, died. All existence on earth was blotted out – man, cattle, creeping things, and birds of the sky were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

It builds as a crescendo: (1) the waters increased so the ark rose; (2) the waters swelled and increased greatly; (3) and then the waters swelled fifteen cubits higher until everything was gone.

We’re in the middle of the World Series, so I can use a metaphor Little League. God employed the “mercy rule.” You score three runs and your parents cheer; three more and everyone is happy because the kid who bats ninth and hasn’t had a hit all season finally made it to first base; but three more, and the umpire ends the inning. Enough is enough. You made your point, you scored your runs, and now you need to let the other team have a crack. That’s the mercy rule.

And maybe God did the same thing. Okay – God got angry. Some of us may have said “I’m going to kill you” at one time or another. But saying it and doing it are not the same thing. Or with other spats or feuds – you get angry at someone; you decide not to talk to them; and then a few months later you

notice how the disagreement has escalated. And it's time to say "enough." I'm sure I had a reason to be upset. But now it has gone too far. *And God remembered.*

A little more than a week before an election, we can ask the same question. I want my candidate and my party to win. But do I want to see the other party completely destroyed? And if I say "yes," do I really mean that? God remembered that Noah was a human being. All those people, all those animals. ... Maybe it was too much.

*Vayizkor Elohim et Noah*, The Rabbis of the Midrash ask: What did God remember? And they answer: "*Biy-at yisrael l'har sinai*, God remembered Israel's arrival at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah." God "remembered" the future.

And if you think that's crazy, I will point out that the calendar math makes some sense. The Flood began in the second month on the 17<sup>th</sup> day – that's the 17<sup>th</sup> of Heshvan, which, incidentally, is 10 days from tomorrow. It rained 40 days and the waters swelled for another 150 days. Some months are 29 days and some 30, so if you take 190 days from 17 Heshvan you get to 27 Iyyar (give or take a couple days), which is about when the Torah says the Israelites arrived at Sinai. It's a few thousand years early, but God is not confined by the limits of time. So God remembered Moses.

And maybe this idea of remembering the future isn't so outlandish. Maybe there is a lesson in the notion that God didn't just remember Noah. God didn't just remember the evil things all those others had done. God also remembered the great things that people would *yet* do if given the chance. And we've been there too. Most of us have no trouble remembering the past. If someone does something to cross me, I never forget. But what about the future? Can I "remember" the great things that this same person who crossed me may do for me someday if given the chance? Can I "remember" the way that child I've written off as stupid or violent or misbehaved or unfocused is someday going to design the next Apple computer?

*Vayizkor Elohim*, God remembered the future and decided not to give up on the world.

And what did God remember when the waters had swelled? Why did God decide to stop up the floodgates of the sky and the fountains of the deep?

Maybe God remembered that there were people on the other side of those ark walls. Maybe God remembered that any family who had been cooped up for 190 days (six months and 10 days at home with your family; gee, I wonder what that would be like!) any family would be at wit's end. The turkeys were probably fighting with the chickens and the hyenas were sparring with the baboons, and the only response I can imagine from Noah when God "remembered" is "what took you so long?"

"God remembered" means that God acknowledged the very real possibility that things were happening behind closed doors that were not quite right. God "remembered" the possibility that someone in the neighborhood needed help. God made it stop raining so Noah could open the door to

the ark. "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants," Louis Brandeis wrote. People act in a certain way when they know others are watching. And the opposite is true as well.

This Shabbat has been dubbed by our community as Purple Shabbat. October is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and purple is its color. I have been active on this issue for years through JCADA, the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse. JCADA reports a 400% increase in calls to their hotline since the pandemic began; and other organizations report similar increases because everyone is at home. And, unfortunately, not every home is safe.

The word for Purple Shabbat is "empowerment." We as a community must empower victims of power-based violence and abuse to speak up. And the best way to empower is to acknowledge that the problem exists. In Jewish and non-Jewish homes, things happen that shouldn't. To pretend otherwise is to enable abusers. Victims need to know that if they come forward, we will listen. We will investigate. We will support. We will make the connection so that experts who understand abuse and the legal and protective systems can help. We as a community share the responsibility to remember, as God remembered, that everyone deserves *shalom bayit*. The space behind the walls must be safe.

"*Vayizkor Elohim, And God remembered.*" What did God remember? God remembered that no fair punishment endures forever. God remembered the future and all the good that would come from Noah and his descendants. God remembered that no person can be safe if the doors to the outside are never opened. God remembered Noah. And on this Shabbat we pray that God will remember us, that we may soon hear the call that Noah heard after all those months in quarantine: "*Tze min ha-tevah, It is time to come out of the ark.*" Shabbat shalom.