Surviving the Flood

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We ask the wrong questions about the story of the Flood.

We ask how God could do such a thing. We ask how a God who is good could destroy a world. We ask how a just God could ignore the difference between perpetrator and victim in His zeal to wipe the world clean. We ask how a loving God could abandon His creation.

The right question, for anyone who knows the names Auschwitz, Treblinka, or Babi Yar, is not how God could have done such a thing. The right question for those who remember is how it is that God has never been compelled to do it again.

These are the unspeakable questions that these places dare us to ask: What merit can the human race possibly have that outweighs the horror of its crimes? What human accomplishment, joy, or meaning can matter enough to make it defensible for the world to continue spinning while children are incinerated?

The aftermath of the Flood answers these questions without dissembling. There is no merit great enough. Humanity endures not because of its merit but because of God's promise. The

rainbow, the sign of God's covenant never to destroy the world again, is a symbol of the starkest sort of hope in its promise that even when humanity is at its worst—even when we might wish that another flood would come because, on some level, an end to all would be better than a world suffused with this much evil—there will be a future.

The promise is the end to a nightmare, but it is also a form of abandonment: there is no possibility of a reset. God will not wipe out evildoers in favor of a new world created for one innocent man and his descendents. Instead, the world keeps spinning. Victims and perpetrators, in the aftermath, live side by side, and their descendents must learn to share this world, soaked with countless tears and oceans of blood.

What happens in the aftermath of the unspeakable in a world promised, destined, and doomed to continue to exist?

In the final verses of Yonah, the story of the reluctant prophet, we are given the beginnings of an answer.

Yonah, who shares a name with the dove Noah sends out of the ark to survey the newly destroyed world, seems to yearn for a world in which God never issued His promise. It is understandable: Nineveh is the capital of the Assyrian empire,notoriously cruel, that will ultimately exile and destroy Israel's Ten Tribes. Yonah does not want to be the messenger that warns Ninveh, offering them a chance to repent and escape God's wrath. Yonah yearns for a world in which justice reigns, in which shedding innocent blood inevitably leads to mass destruction.

When Yonah realizes that Ninveh will be spared, he cries out to God:

יונה ד:ב-ג

[2]וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־ה׳ וַיֹּאמַר אָנָּה ה׳ הֲלוֹא־זֶה דְבָרִי עַד־הֱיוֹתִי עַל־אַדְמָתִי עַל־כֵּן קִדַּמְתִּי לִבְרֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֵל־חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל־הָרָעָה: [3]וְעַתָּה ה׳ קַח־נָא אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִמֶּנִּי כִּי טוֹב מוֹתִי מֵחַיָּיי:

Yonah 4:2-3

[2]He prayed to God, saying, "O God! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. [3]Please, God, take my life, for I would rather die than live."

Yonah expresses the anguish of a world in which mercy outweighs justice. How can it be that this city, famous for its cruelty, will survive? How can it be that a society that reigns by fear and blood and death can be offered the possibility of a future?

God does not justify Ninveh's continued existence by pointing to their repentance or saying that their future good deeds will somehow outweigh the evil they have done. Those considerations are irrelevant here. Instead, God offers this reply:

יונה ד:יא

וַאֲנִי לֹא אָחוּס עַל־נִינְוֵה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר יֶשׁ־בָּהּ הַרְבֵּה מִשְׁתֵּים־עֶשְׂרֵה רִבּוֹ אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע בֵּין־יְמִינוֹ לִשְׂמֹאלוֹ וּבְהֵמָה רַבָּה:

Yonah 4:11

"...Should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!"

God's response to Yonah is not about forgiveness. He does not say that because Ninveh has repented their sins should be forgotten. Instead, God tells Yonah the difference between how the prophet sees and how God sees. Where Yonah looks at Ninveh and sees a city, God looks and sees life: people and animals, struggling to survive. It is life—and God's love of life—that keeps Ninveh standing.[1]

If we are looking for justice or a grand cosmic accounting, Yonah's ending leaves us with nothing. But if we are looking for a way to make sense of a world where there will never again be a flood, where the children of murderers and victims must live side by side, we find the kernel of a path forward.

This is why the world endures: not because there is forgiveness. Not because we have forgotten.

But because God loves life. Because where we see grand, faceless entities—a whole world that deserves destruction, countries and empires that bear collective guilt—God sees human beings, scared and hungry.

And perhaps the only chance we have for redemption in this blood-soaked world is for us to see them too.

[1] R. Shai Held observes that the reason God decided to destroy the world in the Flood was the same reason God promised to never flood the world again. All that changed for God was God's emotional stance towards human beings. See his essay on Parashat Noah 5774, "Before and After the Flood, Or: It All Depends on How You Look," now published in *The Heart of Torah*, and available here: https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/and-after-flood.