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Noach 5772 - Our Fragile World  
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As a child, I dreamed of becoming an astronaut when I grew up. I was fascinated by everything having to do with space and space travel. I loved watching the shuttle launches on television; the sheer power of the rockets propelling this human-made thing into the heavens. I loved watching videos of the astronauts floating in zero gravity, I ate astronaut ice cream, I owned and regularly read the book, “How Do You Go to the Bathroom in Space?” But most of all, I loved the images of the earth captured from space. The earth-rise from the moon, with our planet glowing blue over the desolate, grey craters of the moon’s horizon. One of my favorite images, which still hangs in my old room at my parents’ house, is a picture of the earth, taken over the cargo bay of the space shuttle.

Those images are incredible. Even today, when I watch the latest SpaceX launch, or look at images of the earth taken from space, I still feel that same sense of wonder that I did as a kid: it looks so majestic, so peaceful; it also provides a unique sense of perspective, sort of like I’m looking down on myself from on-high. In an interview on NPR’s Fresh Air some years ago, Canadian astronaut, Commander Chris Hadfield, spoke about his experiences as a seasoned space traveler during the shuttle era. In the midst of the interview, he spoke about the connection he saw between his own space travel and his faith. He said:

The big pervasive feeling onboard looking at the Earth [from space] is one of tremendous exquisite privilege that it exists. ... But I think what everyone would find if they could be in that position — if they could see the whole world every 90 minutes and look down on the places where we do things right, and look down where we’re doing stupid, brutal things to each other and the inevitable patience of the world that houses us — I think everybody would be reinforced in their faith, and maybe readdress the real true tenets of what’s good and what gives them strength. ...[when it comes to faith] there are no wishy-washy astronauts.

Hadfield is not specific here on which aspects of his faith are reinforced in this experience. It could be a sense of wonder and awe in the Divine ability to create something so beautiful. It could be an affirmation that, as humans, we have a right to be here, or that as brutal as humans can be to each other, there is still something inherently good within us.

With these comments in mind, consider our Torah portion for this week: Noach. The story of Noah and the flood is possibly one of the most epic, well-known biblical stories. The world becomes corrupt and the earth is filled with lawlessness and violence. And in response, God decides to bring a flood wiping out all of humanity, except for Noah who is called “righteous and blameless in his generation,” his family, and an ark full of animals, arriving by twosies-twosies. But this line struck me:

וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה נִשְׁחָתָהּ, כִּי-הִשְׁחִית כָּל-בֶּשֶׂר אֶת-דַּרְכּוֹ עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

“(Gen 6:12) When God saw the earth, and behold: it had gone to ruin, for all flesh had ruined its ways on earth, (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 the earth.”

Noah is a complicated story with a complicated theology. The biblical authors present an image of a God sitting on high, watching over the world in judgment, retributive when humanity goes awry. It's an image and a theology that most moderns, myself included, find challenging. I don't find the idea of a God meddling in human affairs compelling - as much as it may pain some of you to hear it, I don't believe that God will help the Giants (or the Dodgers, for that matter) win the Playoffs. Only training, communication, and teamwork can do that. And good pitching.

Gunther Plaut, the great Torah scholar, writes,

“In the view [of most moderns], the relevance of the Noah story is confined to its emphasis on God's moral judgment. In considering the story as a homily on the consequences of human corruption, lawlessness, and violence, we can affirm that they do bring on the judgment of God. We may experience it in social and moral conditions, or in nature's physical realm (as in our pollution of the atmosphere and water, or our disturbance of the ecological balance). An offense against this balance is an offence against God (who guarantees life and its laws), which may bring on dire and unforeseen consequences.”

Whether you find the biblical portrayal of God compelling or not, there is still much to learn here. We have the gift of being able to contemplate these matters through the lens of history, and, occasionally, with the perspective of viewing our world from space.

Picture yourself, floating out in space, in the time of Noah, watching the entire world go by, every 90 minutes. The biblical authors, without satellites or shuttles, imagined God watching over the earth from on high. Can you imagine how the biblical authors must have thought about the extent of the corruption of the earth, so much so that the God who looked down at the Creation and declared it “*tov me'od*, very good,” just a few chapters earlier, decided to wipe it all out, to end all those lives, to attempt to reboot Creation? How bad must it have been? What was this generation of humanity doing to each other? What damage were they doing to the earth? And how does that image compare to what we might see now, in our own day? In the unfolding of the story, our tradition suggests that Noah was the *only one* doing things right - everyone else was, to use Commander Hadfield's words, “doing stupid, brutal things to each other,” and God's patience had run out.

How might God's view as depicted in the Bible compare to our world today? Where are we getting it right, and where are we being particularly brutal to each other and our world? Do we even need images from space to remind us of those places in the world that are in ruins?

How do the developed parts of the world compare to developing nations? We know, intellectually and from reading the news, that there is incredible disparity in the world, that the gap between the rich and the the poor is becoming wider and wider in more and more places. We know the ways in which COVID has affected the developing world at drastically higher and more damning rates than in resource-rich nations.

What about the parts of the world where corruption and lawlessness rule? Consider the danger and destruction that follows when corrupt leaders, pit one group of humans against another to fight over diminishing natural resources. In places like Sudan, these conflicts led to the deaths of millions of people and displaced hundreds of thousands.

And how do we address the devastation caused by climate change? In California, we are in the midst of the worst drought on record. Our lands are parched and brittle, with massive wildfires laying in wait, set off by the tiniest sparks. But we are not the only ones who are affected by a warming world. For us, it's a lack of water, but consider the massive storms in the South and East, fueled by the rising temperatures of the oceans, with once-in-a-century storms now occurring annually. In a recent study conducted by the UN, looking at water-related disasters, researchers found that flooding events increased by 134 percent since the year 2000, and droughts occurred around 30 percent more often than 20 years ago. They estimate that by the year 2050, there could be more 5 billion people without reliable access to water.

There is great perspective we can achieve in considering the view of our world from space, but how can we gain a similar perspective while remaining earth-bound? What are the things we should be paying closer attention to that perhaps cannot be seen from space? Do we take note, then go about our day, as if watching the world go by from space, or do we find ways to take action to combat climate change. One of the best first steps is to educate ourselves. Beth Am is hosting a two-session series on climate change, called "[Oy, Climate Change! What Can WE at Beth Am Do Now to Make a Difference?](#)", exploring what we can do individually and as a community to combat climate change. The first session is on **Sunday, October 17, at 1:00 on Zoom**. You can learn more about this important program on the Beth Am website, and it's open to anyone, whether you're a Beth Am member or not.

One of the core lessons of the Noah story is a reminder that we only have one world, and that, in this current iteration, which has lasted since that flood, God demonstrates tremendous faith in US. Just as we continue to learn from the story of the flood, returning to it year after year, so too, the story suggests that God learns an important lesson as well. As a sign of God's renewed faith in humanity, God offers the rainbow as a promise that God will never again flood the earth, never again wipe out humanity. And we must hold up our end of the bargain: to learn from our history, to strive to be a source of good in the world, to take steps to care for this precious world in which we live.

We have a responsibility to take care of our world and our fellow humans. As Jews, our tradition compels us to not lose sight of the need for each of us to bring good into the world. In the words of Hillel's famous teaching, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" We must take care of ourselves, but we must go beyond what is comfortable and take action in our world, now. We must remember this story as a reminder that no matter how bad things might seem - and these days, they seem pretty bad, God has faith in us that we'll find a solution, we'll solve the problems. As Commander Hadfield reminds us, given their opportunity to look down on the earth, passing over the entire world

every 90 minutes, “there are no wishy-washy astronauts.” Things can seem scary, but the lesson that we find in the rainbow, repeated in the blessing for seeing a rainbow even today, is that God has faith in us that we’ll be able to figure it out. Sometimes it just falls on us to bring a little extra goodness into our world; to never be wishy-washy on the possibility that humanity was and is worth saving. This world has sustained us, now it’s our turn to return the favor and tend to our fragile world.