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Kol Rinah  
Parashat Breisheet  
November 5, 2016 / 4 Cheshvan 5777

What is an ark? “Ark” is the word we use in English to refer to the chest that contained the tablets that God wrote the ten commandments on, that was found by Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The Hebrew word for that ark is ארון. And that’s that what we call the ark inside of which we keep our sifre Torah: we call it the *aron hakodesh*, the holy ark.

But of course, there’s another ark, Noah’s Ark, which in Hebrew is called a *teva*. Incidentally, there’s only one other *teva* in the Bible. Any guesses? It’s the word used to refer to the basket that Yocheved puts her son Moses in when she floats him down the Nile, which the daughter of Pharaoh finds.

I want to explore this sense of the word “ark,” with you, and think about the ways in which a synagogue—the building, and the congregation, are like an ark, and also unlike an ark.

We can think about the purpose of the ark from three different perspectives—from the point of view of God, of Noah and his family, and from the point of view of the animals, but for today, we’re going to focus on God and Noah’s perspectives.

When God tells Noah to build the ark, for God, the ark is a very intentional way to save and preserve something in danger of being completely wiped off the face of the earth. In the case of the story of Noah, it happens to be humanity, as well as every species of animal.

The ark is also a symbol of God’s ambivalence, of God’s feeling two different strong impulses simultaneously. On the one hand, God wants to destroy the world and start from scratch. On the other hand, God does not really want to destroy everyone and everything, and have to create the world completely anew. The ark is God’s compromise between revolutionary change—destroying the world and starting again, and complete stasis—making no change whatsoever in the world.

For Noah and his family, the ark is a safe place to be, a sanctuary, where they are safe from the forces buffeting the world, yet where they have no control over their destination or anything happening to them. They are safe, yet have no agency.

Let’s think about a synagogue now, and see how well it compares to an ark. For God, the ark is a way of saving and preserving. Does a synagogue save and preserve? Of course. In some sense, a synagogue saves and preserves Judaism, or at the very least, certain public, communal aspects of Judaism, like communal prayer rituals and rituals around the sefer Torah.

But remember how for God the ark also symbolized the balance between revolution and stasis? Synagogues are not museums, or at least our synagogues are not museums.

To digress briefly, when I was in Rome this summer, we visited the Great Synagogue there. The entire building is essentially a museum, because the building and all of the objects therein are historic. Also historic is the particular nusach—the melodies, precise wordings of prayers, and traditions—it’s from the Romaniot tradition, the tradition native to Rome that’s maybe two thousand years old, and is very consciously being preserved.

But we are not a museum, nor are most synagogues. Our goal is not to preserve things in formaldehyde forever, unchanging. But also, we do not intend to invent something entirely new and discontinuous with the past. We are not trying to start a new religion. A synagogue

very much does embody the ambivalence God feels at wanting both to destroy and preserve the world. We want to preserve and save Judaism, but we also want it to evolve and change, to live and breathe, and meet our own changing needs, and the needs of a changing world.

For Noah and his family, the ark is a safe sanctuary where they have no agency, no control over their destiny. I know for many of us, synagogue, shul, is precisely such a sanctuary, such a safe space. Regardless of what craziness is going on at work or at home, in St. Louis, America, or the world, you know that you can some peace and quiet at shul. There will be familiar seats in a familiar room, familiar words in a familiar book, familiar melodies sung by familiar voices, and familiar people schmoozing about familiar subjects over familiar food. In a chaotic world, shul can be our ark, our sanctuary where we feel safe, where everything is familiar, and ordered. It can be a place where there's a sense of control. And this is so important, because we are all too aware of how little control we have, and how disordered and unsafe and chaotic the rest of the world and our lives are. This can be one little space, a few short hours in our week, where we can escape the turbulent waters, and be warm, and dry and safe.

And yet. For Noah and his family and the animals, the ark is not a stable, sustainable habitat. They would eventually need more food and fresh water, and more space for the inevitable baby human beings and baby animals that would be born. If they stayed on the ark, in their safe sanctuary too long, never coming out, it would become their grave.

Likewise, a synagogue cannot remain static, constant and unchanging without becoming a museum, and eventually, a graveyard, for Judaism, and for Jews. Fresh energy, people, and ideas are crucial to sustainability.

One of the critiques of Noah is that he never speaks, not when God tells him to build the ark, not when it's time to get on, not when they are on the ark, and not even when they get off the ark, until after he's gotten drunk, and then woken up. Noah never engages with the world around him, the world that God destroys, and never warns the people around him, nor argues with God, as Abraham and Moses do forcefully and successfully.

Noah and his family on the ark have no agency over themselves or the world, no sense of purpose in terms of healing or repairing the world, no engagement with the world around them. He's known in Yiddish as a *tsaddik im pelz*, a tsaddik—a righteous person, in a coat, “who, instead of helping others build a fire to warm themselves, just pulls his own coat tighter around himself.”\*

Our role as Jews, and as humans is not to pull our comfortable, warm coats tighter around ourselves. It's to collect coats for those who don't have coats, which we're doing right now, incidentally—bring your coats by the shul! Our mission is to imitate God and just as God clothes the naked, visits the sick and feeds the hungry, so should we. We can learn and practice doing those things in shul, but in the end, we can't do them snug in a sanctuary. Rather, our experiences at shul should impel us and compel us to act outside, in the world.

And regarding the lack of agency, we hate feeling helpless. And while we are just a few people in a large nation in a large world, it is paralyzing, demoralizing, disempowering and defeatist to say that nothing we do matters. What we do does matter, and we have some

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\* Rabbi Lawrence Kushner in *Five Cities of Refuge: Weekly Reflections on Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*, by Lawrence Kushner and David Mamet (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), p. 8.

agency, some control and power to repair the world for ourselves and others. We are not so helpless as Noah.

Finally, the ark as sanctuary is intended as a temporary, stopgap measure, not a permanent home for its passengers. While the people on the ark are safe and satisfied, God's ultimate purpose for them is not to live on the ark; God needs them to repopulate the entire earth, which they can't do from the comfort of their ark.

The synagogue, in the end, I think too, is a kind of stopgap. In place of people gathering organically in small groups to live Jewishly, taking responsibility for all the different aspects of communal Jewish life, a synagogue takes care of many of those dimensions of Jewish life so they happen *for* people. The synagogue has a minyan, so people don't have to create it, and so that not everyone has to go. The synagogue has a religious school because Jewish education is really hard to do, especially if you yourself are not so learned.

There is much, much, much to be said for synagogues, don't get me wrong. The professionalism and expertise that can be brought to services and prayer, Jewish education for kids and adults, the space to have beautiful, functional spaces for all our Jewish needs, the ability to gather in large, inspiring groups to be together and to be in the presence of God, who is described in Proverbs as being especially present in the multitude—these are all critical roles of synagogues.

One of my jobs as a rabbi is to be the curator of this space—of this sanctuary, this safe space, this ark, so to speak. I will strive to keep it familiar and safe in all kinds of ways, so that it can always be that safe harbor amid rolling seas that you need, and that I need too. And I will also always strive to keep it fresh, with new voices and melodies and sounds, with new ideas and new challenges.

I have to imagine that once in a while a wave would crash against the side of the ark and everyone onboard would get a little wet. That spray is a critical reminder of the outside world. There will be times when I and we will get a little wet from the spray of the outside world even while in our safe sanctuary.

There will be times when we get completely soaked by accident, despite our best efforts, and times when we want to get a little wet, but get either much more or less than we bargained for.

And I will remind us—you and me, as often as I can, that what we do in here ultimately matters much less than what we do out there—because our mission and God's purpose for us is not to live on an ark, but to live in the world.

Shabbat shalom.