

Running From Our Fears
Is the Surest Way to Meet Them
Parashat Noach 5778

For as long as I can remember, I have been a fan of classic myths and legends. I love to read stories about larger than life heroes who do superhuman feats and face off against terrifying evil in an attempt to save the rest of us mere mortals. The Greek myths in particular have always captivated me. Not only because the Hero often triumphs and is someone to be admired, but often because they have darkness in their origin or throughout their stories that they must overcome.

One of the most powerful parts of these stories are when evil prophecies or dire fates are involved. Famously, you have the character of Oedipus, who spends his life running from a terrible prophecy, struggling to overcome his destiny, and still, he ends up meeting disaster. Even so, he manages to accomplish incredible feats along the way. But sometimes I think how much more could characters like this have accomplished in their stories had they simply faced what they feared and tried to live the best life they could? Would heading toward fear instead of away have created a completely different outcome?

We get a small taste of that this week in Parashat Noach. Hidden at the end of the parashah, in Chapter 11 of Bereishit, we have the story of the Tower of

Babel, the infamous building that drew the ire of the Divine and created a world full of misunderstandings, confusing language, and disunity. Many of our rabbis read this piece of Torah and comment that the builders of the Tower of Babel were suffering from hubris; that they were so prideful they sought dominion over the heavens themselves.

But a closer look at the text sheds new light on this story:

בראשית י"א:ג'-ד'

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּה נִלְבְּנָה לִבְנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָּה וְתָהִי לָהֶם הַלְבֵנָה לְאַבֵּן וְהַחֲמֵר הִיָּה לָהֶם לְחֵמֶר: וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֵבֵה | נִבְנֶה-לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֹאשׁוֹ בַּשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן-נִפְּוֹץ עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ... הֵבֵה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שֵׁם שְׁפָתֵם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שִׁפְתֵי רֵעֵהוּ: וְיִפְּץ יי אֶתֶם מִשָּׁם עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ וַיִּחְדְּלוּ לִבְנֹת הָעִיר:

Genesis 11:3-4

(3) They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard."—Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar.—

(4) And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world..."

(7) Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech."

(8) Thus the LORD scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city.

As it turns out, the generations that lived with the shadow of the Flood hanging over their heads only wanted safety and security, to live in a world where they would not be banished from their homes and have their lives upended by forces beyond their control. But the very thing that they do to try to ensure that they are

not scattered all over the world, that they can stay safe and secure, ultimately leads to a complete division in their community. God intentionally inflicts them with the one thing of which they are most afraid.

And this seems to be a recurring theme throughout Jewish thought: try to avoid the natural order of things or God's degree or what is ethical and right, then you will be punished with the very thing that you hate and fear most. In the haftarah from Isaiah that we read just moments ago, which is specifically for Shabbat Rosh Chodesh, we are told by God:

ישעיהו ס"ו:ב-ד'

וְאֶת־כָּל־אֱלֹהֵי יָדֵי עֲשֻׁתָּהּ וַיְהִי כָל־אֱלֹהֵי נְאֻמִּי וְאֶל־זֶה אֲבִיט אֶל־עֲנִי וְנִכְה־רוּחַ וְחָרָד
עַל־דְּבָרֵי: שׁוֹחֵט הַשּׁוֹר מִכַּה־אִישׁ זֹבֵחַ הַשֶּׁה עֶרְף לֵלֵב מַעֲלָה מִנְחָה דָם־חֲזִיר מִזְכִּיר
לְבָנָה מִבָּרָה אֵין גַּם־הֵמָּה בָּחֲרוּ בְּדַרְכֵיהֶם וּבִשְׁקֻצֵיהֶם נִפְשָׁם חִפְצָה: גַּם־אֲנִי אֲבַחֵר
בְּתַעֲלָלֵיהֶם וּמִגִּוְרֵתָם אֲבִיא לָהֶם יַעַן קָרָאתִי וְאֵין עֹנֶה דִּבַּרְתִּי וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ הָרַע
בְּעֵינִי וּבְאָשֶׁר לֹא־חִפְצָתִי בָּחֲרוּ:

Isaiah 66:2-4

(2) All this was made by My hand, And thus it all came into being — declares the LORD. Yet to such a one I look: To the poor and brokenhearted, Who is concerned about My word.

(3) As for those who slaughter oxen and slay humans, Who sacrifice sheep and immolate dogs, Who present as oblation the blood of swine, Who offer incense and worship false gods— Just as they have chosen their ways And take pleasure in their abominations,

(4) So will I choose to mock them, To bring on them the very thing they dread. For I called and none responded, I spoke and none paid heed. They did what I deem evil And chose what I do not want.

Why is this such a common cultural trope? Why are we cautioned that we often meet our destinies on the road to avoid them? Because our cultural tradition is trying to rescue us from ourselves.

It is so easy to be afraid. Let's face it, the world is scary! There are things that terrify us every day. We imagine our worst-case scenarios and picture them coming true. We see terrible things happen to others and think, "What if that was me?" Being afraid is easy. But everywhere in our tradition we are told not to run from our fears or what we know is right, even though it is often the hardest or least pleasant thing we could do.

Don't run away from change because it makes you uncomfortable. The future comes to us all. None of us can stop time, but by embracing the possible you can help shape it into what you want it to be.

Don't run away from the people who need your help, even though it might put you out. We all have responsibilities we did not choose, but simply inherited as the difficult privilege of being a part of the human community.

Don't run away from who you are, because even if you are not yet who you always wanted to be, you are incredible. Be the best you that you can be, not someone who you think you are supposed to be.

Don't run away, because we need you. Don't run away because you are stronger than you ever imagined. Stay, sit a while, dream not about what frightening things might happen, but about what amazing things might be possible, if we but try.

Shabbat Shalom.