The Surprising Words of a Bush Republican

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It is not that often that an article by a neo-conservative catches my eye, but while I was in Florida I read an op-ed about white evangelicals written by Michael Gerson. A columnist for the Washington Post, he worked at the Heritage Foundation and served in George W. Bush's White House as a senior policy advisor and speech writer. In 2007, Gerson was named by *Time* as one of "The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America."

Highly criticized for his role as part of Bush's Iraq team, he currently has a politically conservative oriented talk show on PBS.

What caught my attention was his opening paragraph about Noah and the flood. He wrote:

"It has always struck me as strange that a narrative about genocide—Noah and the ark—should be employed as a children's story. As the other boys and girls in Sunday school focused on the cuteness of the rescued animals, I remember thinking about the mass of humanity desperately clawing to get into Noah's boat."

His article actually focuses on Noah's second act, his drunkenness and nakedness, from which he draws conclusions concerning the white evangelicals of today. Writing about the extent to which they have been reshaped, in his opinion to

their detriment, in the president's image, he finds hope in younger evangelicals who differ from their elders. He notes that two-thirds of young evangelicals believe that immigration strengthens our nation, and support the dignity of the presidential office and the rule of law.

What really stuck with me though was his opening sentence with its vivid image: ". . . the mass of humanity desperately clawing to get into Noah's boat. "

In some ways this view of Noah's ark parallels one of the interpretations of this story in the Midrash and then later by Elie Wiesel.

Careful reading of the text notes that after the flood Noah, is no longer referred to as *tamim,* perfect, or *tzadik,* righteous, as he is in the beginning. One commentary explains it in this way. They imagine Noah leaving the ark, shocked at the destruction that he sees, and complaining to God. In the words of the Midrash, "Noah turns toward God and asks: *Ribbono shel Olam,* Master of the Universe, we call you Rachamim, the merciful one, the charitable one, the compassionate one—where is Thy Mercy, Thy charity, Thy compassion?" At that point God challenges him: Now you are asking these questions? When it is too late. Why didn't you speak up before? I told you to your face, *ki otchah raiiti tzadik lefanai,* that I considered you a *tzadik,* a just man, (standing before me). Why did you think I said that? I said it for one reason only: to move you to be aware of your mission, to force you to intercede on behalf of mankind. I wanted you to assume the mantle of moral leadership and speak up for my intended victims."

There are some midrashim that see Noah trying to act the prophet, building the ark slowly over many years, so as to interest his neighbors in asking what he is doing, and influence them to repent. But that Noah is missing in the Biblical text itself.

In the Bible, once Noah hears that he and his family will be saved, he is ready to move to action, without regard for the fate of others. Because of that, he is called by Rabbi Moses Alshech, a 16th century scholar, a "*tzadik* in fur," meaning when it is cold he puts on a fur coat, rather than heating the study hall for the other poorer students.

After the flood, the first thing Noah does upon leaving the ark is to plant a vineyard. Elie Wiesel, recognizing in Noah survivor's guilt, believes Noah plants the vineyard so as to drown his sorrows and regrets in alcohol-induced oblivion. This is consistent with the view of Rabbi Aaron Samuel Kaidanover, from 17th entury Poland, that to stand aboard the ark and witness the end of humanity was both consequence and ultimate punishment.

It is natural to be concerned first with our families. We love them, we care for them, we want to protect them and to launch them on the path toward a good life. It is even acceptable in Jewish ethics that this be the first locus of our attention. But what is not acceptable is when that is the extent of our concern. After the flood God gives humanity seven basic laws, in recognition that human instinct, the impulses of our heart, are not enough to ensure that we do the right thing. Our commentaries stress that Noah is not Abraham, who recognizes that injustice to anyone anywhere is his concern. He is not Moses, who successfully

stands up for the people when God threatens to destroy them. He is better than most but that is not good enough.

Gerson's image of "the mass of humanity desperately clawing to get into Noah's boat" makes me think of the great divides in our society and the present popularity of solutions that protect those who can afford to protect themselves without addressing the common good.

It is not enough that we do fundraisers at our children's schools because the state funding of education is so poor, without reforming our California state tax code to make high-quality education available to all.

It is not enough that we upgrade our own cars to hybrids or electric cars, often driving more than we might have as a result, without addressing the inadequacies of our public mass transit system and the consequences of our environmental destruction.

The hyper-rich are creating safe havens for themselves in isolated areas with planes to take them, and them alone, to safety, sometimes consciously describing these as the modern equivalents of Noah's ark. All the while they are financially supporting lawmakers who maximize their short-term profits rather than long-term impacts. They fail to contribute through just taxes to what needs to be done, to reduce global warming and to mitigate its effects on the poor as well as the rich, here and abroad.

Often we comfort ourselves by saying we are better than most, but the story of destruction that we read in this week's Torah portion reminds us that better is not good enough.