



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Noach 5774

By Dani Passow

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Following the tragic and near-utter destruction of humankind during the deluge, Noach, the patriarch of the lone family to survive the flood, offers a sacrifice to God. The Torah records that God finds the smell of the sacrifice pleasing, but follows with a perplexing line: “God smelled the pleasing aroma, and God said in His heart: ‘I will not continue to curse the earth because of man, since the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again smite every living being, as I have done.’”¹ Why would God respond to Noach’s sacrifice by stating that man’s heart is evil? Wouldn’t this statement about the innate nature of humankind have been more appropriate as a response to the corruption that precipitated the flood?

To better understand God’s reaction to the sacrifice, we need to explore Noach’s prior behavior. When God first tells Noach to build the ark, the design instructions include the command, “You shall make a window (*tzohar*) for the ark.”² The existence of the *tzohar* begs Noach to bear witness to the suffering taking place outside of the ark. But Noach doesn’t seem to hear this message. Instead of being aware of the events unfolding outside of the ark, he goes out of his way to remain oblivious. We read that as the storm settles, “Noach removed the covering of the ark;”³ however, at no point was Noach instructed to place a cover over the ark. It seems that rather than stare the suffering of others in the face, Noach hides from it and uses the ark as a cocoon to shelter himself from the horrors being suffered by the rest of humanity.

Noach’s act of closing himself off from the world is understandable. After the waters have subsided, Noach is so afraid of seeing the devastation that lies beyond the threshold of his wooden bubble that he needs to be commanded by God to leave the ark.⁴ Perhaps from the small view he sees when uncovering the ark, Noach is traumatized into paralysis, physically unable to leave his protected world and encounter the destruction outside. Having anticipated this anguish, Noach may have felt the need to remain isolated during the flood, and thus covered the *tzohar* in order to have the strength to carry out his God-given mission of securing the continued existence of life on earth.

But such action is only a compromise; ideally Noach would have let the *tzohar* remain uncovered and witnessed the true extent of the suffering. Had he done so, he likely would have been so devastated by what he saw that bringing a sacrifice in gratitude for his own salvation would have seemed inappropriate. Indeed, God’s statement to Noach upon receiving the sacrifice indicates that Noach has distanced himself too greatly from the rest of humanity. How, in the face of so much death and destruction, God implies, do you, Noach, have the gall to bring a sacrifice? The moment of global mourning, God seems to be saying, should trump a personal religious expression of thanksgiving.

In our everyday lives, what Noach-like compromises do we make? In what ways do we walk around in our own personal arks choosing to protect the emotional and material well-being of ourselves and our families at the expense of engaging with the suffering and needs of others? What efforts can we make to ensure that nurturing our own

¹ Genesis 8:20–21.

² Genesis 6:16.

³ Genesis 8:13.

⁴ Genesis 8:16.

spirituality doesn't overshadow our obligation to be aware of the dire need in the world—the dark reality that 1.4 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day⁵ and that 925 million people are undernourished?⁶ Living in a globalized world where technology affords us the ability to see the real-time distress of so many around us, have we internalized God's message of the tzohar and used these tools to pay attention to the plight of those facing challenges around the globe? When, like Noach, we worry that we will be traumatized by trying to address the suffering of others and therefore seek to fortify ourselves for the work ahead of us, do we go too far and retreat too deeply into the mode of self-care, or are we able to strike the proper balance?

We learn from Noach that we are challenged by God to expect to be traumatized in our efforts to heal the world. Truly paying attention to suffering is risky. It may sap our emotional energy, require us to make radical lifestyle changes, and even raise deeply troubling theological questions about justice. It is therefore normal to wish to shelter ourselves from time to time so as not to be overwhelmed; but God is constantly calling, "Leave the Ark!"⁷



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⁵ U.N. Millennium Development Goals Poverty Factsheet, http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG_FS_1_EN.pdf

⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimate, <http://www.fao.org/hunger/en/>

⁷ Genesis 8:16.

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