

Text Study: Parashat Noah & Environmental Responsibility

1) Understanding Noah: A selection from *Parashat Noah* (Genesis 6:9-22)

9: נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו: 9...Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God... 11The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness.

12When God saw how corrupt the earth was, for all flesh has corrupted its way on earth, 13God 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. 14Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments, and cover its inside and out with pitch... 17 For my part, I am about to bring the Flood—waters upon the earth—to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish."

18 וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתָּךְ וּבָאתָ אֵל הַתֵּבָה אַתָּה וּבְנֵיךָ וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וּנְשֵׁי בְנֵיךָ אִתָּךְ: 18 "But I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark, with your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives.

19And of all that lives, of all flesh, you shall take two of each into the ark to keep alive with you; they shall be male and female. 20From birds of every kind, cattle of every kind, every kind of creeping thing on earth, two of each shall come to you to stay alive. 21For your part, take of everything that is eaten and store it away, to serve as food for you and for them." 22Noah did so; just as God commanded him, so he did.

- *What do you think it means that Noah is described as a "righteous" man? Is there a difference between being righteous and being blameless? If so, which word better describes Noah?*
- *How is Noah portrayed in this biblical passage (responsible, ignorant, obedient, etc)?*

2) Noah's potential: The ancient Rabbis argued whether this is a positive or negative portrayal of Noah. Their discussion is recorded in *Midrash Genesis Rabbah 30-9*:

בְּדֹרֹתָיו **In his age** (Gen. 6:9). R. Judah and R. Nehemiah differed. R. Judah said: Only in his age was he a righteous man [by comparison]; had he flourished in the age of Moses or Samuel, he would not have been called righteous: in the street of the totally blind, the one-eyed man is called clear-sighted, and the infant is called a scholar... Similarly, **In his age** (Gen. 6:9) he was a righteous man. R. Nehemiah said: If he was righteous even in his age, how much more so [had he lived] in the age of Moses. He might be compared to a tightly closed vial of perfume lying in a graveyard, which nevertheless gave forth a fragrant odor; how much more then if it were outside the graveyard!

- *Why is R. Judah critical of Noah? How does his judgment of Noah differ from that of R. Nehemiah?*
- *How do Abraham's actions, as portrayed in Genesis 18:22-32 (when Abraham stands up to God to defend the people of Sodom), compare with those of Noah?*
- *Can you think of any modern examples of figures who are "righteous in their age," according to either R. Judah or R. Nehemiah's interpretation?*
- *How do we respond to the challenges of our day as blameless and/or righteous people?*
- *Is righteousness a relative term?*

3) Noah's shortcomings: In *Midrash Tanhuma* on *Parashat Noah* we find a story that illustrates the weakness that some Rabbis saw in Noah's character:

When Noah came out of the ark, he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed. He began crying for the world and said, "God, how could you have done this?" ... God replied, "Oh Noah, how different you are from the way Abraham ... will be. He will argue with me on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah when I tell him that I plan their destruction... But you, Noah, when I told you I would destroy the entire world, I lingered and delayed, so that you would speak on behalf of the world. But when you knew you would be safe in the ark, the evil of the world did not touch you. You thought of no one but your family. And now you complain?" Then Noah knew that he had sinned.

- *Why do you think the Midrash states that "Noah knew that he had sinned"?*
- *Do you think Noah reacted appropriately to the warning that a natural disaster was approaching? Was Noah justified in thinking only of his family?*
- *There are many respectable scientists, politicians and activists who warn of the dramatic environmental and human health consequences of current human behavior. Do you think we react appropriately to those warning calls? How do you personally react?*
- *How can Noah be seen as a role model or as a bad example for our response to environmental issues today?*

4) Our responsibility: A passage in the *Mishnah (Baba Batra 2:1)* talks about our responsibility not to cause damage to other people's property:

One may not dig a well near his neighbor's well, nor a channel, cave, aqueduct, or basin for washing, unless he distanced it at least three spans from his neighbor's wall, and plastered with lime. One must distance olive or poppy waste, dung, salt, lime, and flint-stones three spans from his neighbor's wall, and plaster with lime. One must distance seeds, plowing, and urine from the wall three hand-lengths.

- *What are the lessons of this Mishnah for the environmental challenges we face today?*
- *Can you think of an example of an environmental catastrophe where the lessons from the Mishnah and/or Noah's behavior are applicable?*
- *How can you use these lessons to reflect upon your personal engagement in the protection of the environment? How does this commentary relate to the story of Noah?*

5) The passage in *Ecclesiastes Rabbah (7:8)* reads: When the Holy Blessed One created the first human, God took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and said to him, "See my creations, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are, and all that I have created, I created for you. Be mindful not to ruin and destroy my world, for if you ruin it, there is nobody to fix it after you."

- *At the end of the story of Noah, God makes a covenant with humanity that God will never again destroy the world. The reminder of that covenant is the rainbow. What do you think is humanity's responsibility in this covenant? How does humanity's responsibility relate to this Midrash?*