

Parashat Noah: Evil in Service of God's Plan

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin



Dear Friends,

Sometimes it seems as though the Torah is no more than a collection of stories of rebellion! Human beings rebel continuously: in the previous parasha Adam and Chava ate from the Tree of Knowledge despite being forbidden to do so; this week, in Parashat Noah, the people – who have multiplied after the Flood – build a high, defiant Tower that reaches the heavens in order to "make a name for themselves." God punishes all who disobey Him or challenge His limits, and therefore He disbands the Tower and the people, scattering them over the face of the earth and mixing up (Babel-ing) their language.

But they do not learn their lesson. They repeatedly digress, and God repeatedly punishes them. Even when given the formula for a good life, peaceful and secure, humans still insist on "doing wrong in the eyes of the Lord", and by doing so, forego guaranteed happiness.

We too, walk in the footsteps of Adam and Chava, the generation of the Tower of Babel, and Bnei Yisrael in the Wilderness. We rebel, we kick, we ignore, we disobey, and... then we're surprised at the results. We all know what constitutes a healthy lifestyle – nutritious diet, aerobic and meditative exercise, clean air, 8 hours of sleep, calm driving at 55 miles an hour, a smoke-free environment, reducing stress and alcohol consumption, etc. But how many of us do these things that we know are so good for us and guarantee us a wonderful quality of life? Very few! We all know the facts – information has never been as accessible as it is today – and yet we avoid doing what's best for us day after day.

The truth is... sticking to the rules is simply boring!! Doing the right thing isn't exciting, invigorating or exhilarating. Adrenalin, dopamine, and serotonin are tapped mostly when we are "out of bounds" and they beckon to those who prefer "living it up", "living on the edge", and being excited, so much more than being safe, healthy and sound.

No wonder the human story is one of defiance, resistance, and continuous rebellion.

From the moment of birth - when it comes bursting forth somewhat violently - a baby cries out and makes demands. A two year-old throws tantrums in the supermarket; the unbearable teenager is likely to make his parents' life a misery. And just then, when it seems that the storms have passed, we face challenges of finding and

holding a job, raising a family, driving endless carpools, and paying the mortgage. We reach our forties and fifties, and we rebel again.

We rebel against who and what we are; against routine; against the laws of nature; we fantasize about a new and exciting tomorrow.

But there are also equally powerful opposing forces which serve to quell our urge to rebel and defy: social norms and manners, state rules, religion, educational systems, law-enforcement authorities, etc.

But we do not surrender – not when God banishes us from the Garden of Eden, not when He smashes our carefully-built towers, not when He scatters us over the earth, mixing up our languages. We continue to confront Him. We continue to insist on doing whatever excites us. We repeatedly engage the serpent, eat forbidden fruit, build castles in the air, and try to make a name for ourselves.

At the end of Parashat Bereishit God is in total shock from the absolute evil of humans: "And the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all day long," (6:5)

So He decides to destroy Creation and try again.

What a great idea. When I feel like I've had enough, I would love to be able to ask God for a "reset" of the world. But it doesn't work. Immediately following the Flood, Noah, the archetypal survivor, builds an altar which he is not asked to build, and sacrifices representatives of the finest of the animals he has just saved, which he is not asked to do. And God finally gives up: "and the LORD said in His heart: 'I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.'" (8:21)

Yes, we are simply evil! But not just us – so too is nature! Nature continuously kicks and storms. Hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions violate the tranquility of life on this planet. Even the tiniest seed in the earth rebels against its own protective shell as it reaches up for sunlight, forcing its way through the hard earth. A cute kitten that has just finished nursing is banished by its own mother, forced to fight its own way in order to survive. There is no tranquility in nature. All seems to be rebellious and evil.

And all will be seriously punished for the evil we/nature produce: everything is destined to transform, wither, wilt and perish, possibly even the earth itself.

So much so, that it begs the question... **what is evil???** What is the purpose of all the turmoil in our world, all the pain and destruction???

When we observe the universe from a less emotional and fearful place, we discover that evil is just another word for God's own creative powers. Evil seems to "rock" the world in order to birth the new.

The power that throbs within everything – that causes the seed to sprout, that makes the kitten mature, that sends growth hormones through our body; that power, thirsty for dopamine, adrenalin, and serotonin – what is it, if not God Himself at work? What is human curiosity that seeks to discover entire worlds if not the Divine streaming through our reality?

What is our desire for self-fulfillment if not the Lord of Hosts fighting within us? What is the urge to conquer distant peaks and other lofty goals if not the Creator in action?

The prophet Isaiah summed it up: **"I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I am the LORD, that does all these things"** (Isaiah 45, 7)

The world is good, and even very good. Within it a tremendous wave of Divine energy flows, which dismantles mountains, creates new worlds daily, shatters the old, and creates something even better...

God is the good that created this good world, and He is the evil which destroys – through us and through other natural agents of destruction – His good world, in order to create equally good or even better ones.

There are an infinite number of possibilities waiting to be created – an infinite number of worlds, of combinations, of souls. Far be it from us to stop the Infinite from manifesting itself, from being created.

God in our Parasha acknowledges that there is no good reason to destroy the world again. The human being - curious, ambitious, and greedy - was created in the image of his Creator, and as such has Him flowing through his veins, creating and destroying.

Creation is rude and life is defiant. Every breath, every written word, every tune, every structure is in defiance. The creative process opposes yesterday's good, and represents today's yearning for new goodness, for fulfillment of another possibility from among the infinite ones there are.

Tomorrow holds great promise for the good that awaits us. Today, though, is like the sly serpent that is slithering in its idleness through the trees of the Garden, whispering to us: "grow, evolve, live!" Yesterday is the serpent's old skin that had to be shed to allow for the new to present itself.

We - the nation of Israel - are a stiff-necked people that never cease rebelling and challenging God, as well as the nations of the world, science, norms, and wisdom. We are the rebellious transformers of the world, for we've been told:

"Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed." (32:29)

Noah, which in Hebrew means amenable and tranquil, builds an ark to survive the destructive and creative forces of God's ways. Noah survived. But in reality, he is preparing the ground for....

The first Hebrew, the founder of the Israelite, the Jewish and eventually the Israeli People, was the rebellious, revolutionary, and sometimes irritating Avraham. Avram, as he is first called, is born at the very end of Parashat Noah, and is destined (next week, in Parashat Lech Lecha) to reject his country, his homeland, his father's home, and strike out on a new path; one which no person has walked before him. He sets out to fulfill a potential that humanity has not yet known. This is the way, and the only way, that he can fulfill his destiny **of being a blessing.**

From Abraham and his revolutionary descendants, all the people of the earth will be blessed.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha