

Parashat Noah: To 120 and Beyond

Dear Friends,

This week we return to Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. These two stories are seemingly unconnected to each other, but they actually are connected. Very much so.

The first story is familiar to all of us: evil and chaos take over humanity, and God regrets His creation of human beings. He destroys every living thing, saving only Noah, his family, and representatives of all animal species. The Flood lasts for an entire year, after which the survivors re-establish existence on earth.

The second story is a bit less familiar. Noah's descendents multiply and learn the building trade. **“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.”** (Bereishit 11: 3-4) God does not like the idea at all, and He “comes down” to destroy their tower and scatter humanity across the globe (that which they feared), mixing up their languages into seventy different ones.

There is so much truth and depth in these two myths. It's good to return to them year after year.

As for the connection between the stories: both deal with human sin which, in essence, is the constant attempt to escape from simple, fragile humanity. Both stories deal with the desire to conquer eternity and defeat death. The sin committed by the generation of the Tower of Babel is clear in the text itself. The sin that leads to the Flood is less clear. It appears at the end of the last parasha, Bereishit: **“It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on earth—when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.”** (Bereishit 6:1-4) Even without a deep interpretation of these verses, we can see that there is an attempt to step out of the boundaries of humanity and become Marvel-style superheroes.

Both stories mention a desire for a “name”: **“to make a name (shem) for ourselves”** in the story of the Tower, and **“men of renown (shem)”** (men of “a name”) in the story of the Flood. Man desires fame! He or she wants to be “the best.”

Rightly so! It's scary to be a simple, mortal person. It is scary to think that one day we will not be here. It is scary to know that beyond our grandchildren who will still remember and cry at our grave, nothing will remain of us.

But this fear (which could really be called “terror”) has a tremendous price. Our desire for eternity is exhausting! It causes us to try constantly to be “something,” to stand out and push ourselves beyond the limits of who we really are, becoming something we are not.

Perhaps this is the Flood, overwhelmed and flooded with effort to be what we're not. Our Sages called the sense that we are not enough “the yetzer hara” - the evil inclination. You *can* do better, you *should* do better, you *must* do better! And so we reach beyond our limits, starving for a “name”, striving to be all and everything, chasing success, recognition, and... eternity. And so our life is flooded and overwhelmed.

Think about it! Doesn't the sense of being overwhelmed often come from feeling that we have to be more and do more?

And then Noah comes along: **“Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his generation.”**

First of all, he was Noah (meaning “comfortable”, “at ease” in Hebrew). This is already a great compliment. I wonder if this was really his name, or whether it was a nickname which he got because of his easy nature. The ability to be pleasant and comfortable with people is a wonderful quality (and only such a person could survive for an entire year in the Ark with his wife, his children, his daughters-in-law, and all of the animals...).

And he was “blameless” (“tamim”), meaning he did not point a finger at himself or at others, content with being a simple, limited mortal.

He was righteous in his generation, but only then. Compared to Abraham, who appears at the end of the parasha, he wasn't anything special. He was a regular guy.

Humility is the best kind of ark! Human simplicity will keep us afloat in stormy seas of guilt and of demands which threaten to overwhelm us from all directions.

How is this achieved?

First of all, I don't know, because I am not there. I hope to get there at some point.

But my guess is...

Accepting the deep understanding that eternity cannot be found in the personal, because what is personal contains ego and ego is fleeting. Eternity is not to be found in titles, names, things, and honors.

I think that eternity (also called Ein Sof) definitely exists and can even be accessed and experienced. We can even make a covenant with it. Eternity is the energy of life itself. This energy comes from the Ein Sof, dons a shape such as our bodies, and continues onwards, always, for eternity.

Our confusion, as usual, is between the temporary shape this energy dons, and the energy itself.

Only a week ago we read the following mythical description: **“the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.”** We have freedom of choice whether to identify with the “dust of the earth” that we are made of - the body, clothing, and possessions - and the breath of life.

When I use the word “I”, who am I referring to? To my body made of the earth, or to the breath of life which is enlivens me?

Parashat Bereishit ends with the Divine promise that **“My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years.”** (Bereishit 6:3)

The choice is in our hands: who do we identify with?

No one ever challenged us by asking who we really are. We were never taught to identify with the eternal spirit of life.

This requires re-education, no less than that!

It is important to value one's body, to care for it and respect it; to supply its needs and listen to it. It is also important to bury it when it dies, because our body, like every other body and creation, is holy! But it's holiness derives from its temporary, changeable state as the vehicle for the eternal energy of life.

The next time you are asked to identify yourself, tell the clerk that you are the living breath of eternal life that flows within and energizes everything. That energy does not have an ID card, a Social Security number, or a driver's license. It has no name and never will have, because it does not desire one. And if the clerk insists, you can answer in amazement: “Ah, you mean my body? Why didn't you say so? I'm sorry, I didn't understand. So yes, the temporary ID number assigned to my body is...”

Every body has a name, a language, a date of production and an unknown date of expiration. The energy of life, however, does not have a name (although I call it “Hineni”), a language, a date of production or expiration. It does not need towers in the air or an ark, and it does not get overwhelmed. It simply lives.

Much much more than 120 years.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha