

Torah Thoughts Bereshit

5779:

This week we completed the annual cycle of Torah reading, and immediately begin it again, on Simhat Torah. The process of learning these words never ends, and each year we discover new aspects of Torah and new depths to its meaning. This Shabbat we read from parshat Bereishit, which begins the Torah and also begins the story of the world, of humanity and of the Jewish people. Near the end of this parsha, we get a genealogy of the generations from Adam to Noah. What is important about the list is that it connects the first human being, Adam, to Noah. Each of those men was responsible for humanity's survival; each was the father of humanity. As the first man, every other human being counts Adam as their ancestor. Our sages have taught us that we should therefore never claim a lineage greater than anyone else. As the oldest man to survive the great flood that God sent, Noah too is a father of humanity. After all other people perished in the flood, Noah and his family re-established the human race.

Adam and Noah are important as symbols of renewed, humanity. As new generations arise, problems multiply. After the time of Adam the world became so corrupt that God decided to start anew with Noah. And after Noah people attempted to build a structure that could reach heaven itself, a sign of their arrogance as their numbers grew. It seems inevitable that as the generations multiply, so does their sin. The ideal of a single family, who are the ancestors of all, can remind us that things were not always so complicated, and that after tragedy, or when the world seems to be so damaged that there is no longer a place in it for us, that it is possible to begin again with our own families as a kind of new Adam, a new Noah. We can each rebuild the world, one family at a time, one person at a time. In that way we are each an Adam or Noah, capable of literally repopulating the world, and of symbolically redeeming it.