

Noah Sermon 5779

While a storm rages, there can be only prayer; when calm returns, we emerge from the shelter of our arks, so to speak, to find the condition of the world and the work required to rebuild it. The story of Noah is a kind of second creation. The first account of creation, culminating with Adam and Eve, ends with humanity banished from Eden on account of sin. They transgressed God's command and suffered the loss of Eden's perfection. In Noah, banishment is not an option; humanity is already out of the garden, so there is nowhere to go, and the sins are so deep and wide that God sees no other option but to roll back the last two days of creation and begin again with one family.

What were those sins? Our sages have deduced many: Bloodshed, falsehood, deceit, lawlessness and pettiness. In response to an era when virtually everyone was either tainted with evil or had lost all hope because of evil's prevalence, God wipes out almost everyone and begins again. The story ends with the rainbow: God's promise to never again resort to such violence, despite the human propensity for sin. It is a kind of admission of God's resignation in the face of what seems to be humanity's unalterable character, a mixture of exalted achievement and of depravity. At the end of parshat Noah God accepts that violence and sin are part of who we are.

The parshah also ends with another kind of creation story. Migdal Bavel, the tower of Babel, exemplifies once again God's frustration with us and with our chutzpah. Wanting to breach the divide between our abode on earth and God's in the heavens, humanity once again shows that it has no sense of boundaries, of limits. So, once again, God puts a stop to things, this time by making it impossible for people to understand one another's language. God doesn't

banish them, or wipe them out, but does act to frustrate what God clearly sees as an attempt to breach heaven, to erase the distinction between the human and the divine.

At moments like these I feel great empathy for God. I, too, waver between wanting to walk away from humanity, on the one hand, and despairingly accepting its conflicted nature. I have sometimes fantasized about retreating from the world as it is to focus on private concerns, with no cell phone, no internet, and none of the world's ugliness intruding on my quiet, personal world. Violence around the world, including in Israel, saddens us. Millions of refugees flee from violence, and the refusal of countries around the world to help save their lives shocks us. The pettiness and posturing leading into these elections insults our intelligence and should embarrass us. Given the chance, who wouldn't want to turn their back on the world or start all over again?

But the prospect of turning away, of walling ourselves off from the world seems profoundly un-Jewish, however tempting the prospect at moments of despair. Engagement with the world, perhaps especially when things seem at their worst, is our responsibility, our tradition. We can see the problems all around us, but, unlike God in parshat Noah, we cannot start again at the beginning. How can we have a positive role in helping victims of violence and reducing suffering from natural disasters? What should we do?

One answer is prayer. Abraham Joshua Heschel said that prayer may not save us, but it will make us worthy of being saved. When we pray for peace, for understanding, for empathy, we are not asking God to solve our problems but rather asking for the strength to do so ourselves. Prayer is a reflective experience, directed toward both God and ourselves as an expression of our highest values, our hopes and our plans for redeeming the world from its sins. Prayer should not be misconstrued as an escape from problems, but rather as a first step in meaningfully addressing

them by first reflecting on ultimate values. As we pray for those suffering from the effects of the recent hurricanes in the southeast, we do so not only hoping that God will give them strength, but that God will also give us the strength to help.

That help can take the form of gemilut hasadim, acts of lovingkindness. By responding to suffering from natural disasters with empathy, by reaching out to those who are suffering, we reaffirm our shared humanity. One way to do that is to contribute to United Synagogue's Disaster Relief Fund, set up specifically to respond to natural disasters that affect our sister synagogues in the affected areas such as the Carolinas in September, and Florida now.

Like Noah, we need to feel responsible for the creation of a renewed world after the storm, through prayer, gemilut hasadim, and through thoughtful dialogue about the underlying causes of suffering in the world. Rather than turn away from what ails us, Judaism challenges us to face it directly, and to respond without hesitation and with, as Noah did, to rebuild after the storm.

Shabbat shalom.