

NOAH'S SURVIVAL AND ENDURING LEGACY

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Noah's survival experience evolved in three stages. The first began with awareness of the impending destruction. From that point, Noah's life was tormented with the occupation and preoccupation of building the ark and prophesying doom. The second stage commenced when Noah, his family and his charges from the animal kingdom entered the ark and continued for approximately a year (Noah himself had no prior knowledge of this stage's duration). Noah had to perform the grueling task of keeping all the creatures on board alive and well. The last stage was the actual witnessing of the overwhelming devastation upon disembarking; its mark was never erased from Noah's consciousness. This paper will reflect upon Noah's legacy in light of his survival experience.

ACCEPTING THE WORLD'S FATE

Noah probably perceived God's decision to destroy the world as irrevocable.¹ The text lends credence to this assumption. The Hebrew root *SH-H-T* (destroy) appears no less than five times in the seven verses that refer to God's action plan (Gen. 6:11-17). God categorically says to Noah: *the end of all flesh has come before Me* (Gen. 6:13).

Noah was also given explicit instructions regarding his mission. With respect to the ark, its design and measurements were meticulously detailed in the text (Gen. 6:14-16). Who, what, and how to embark on the ark is also clearly spelled out (Gen. 6:19-21; 7:1-3). Altogether, these verses resonate with distinct finality.

The text stresses Noah's passive but unequivocal obedience to God's commands: *Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so he did* (Gen. 6:22); and, *Noah did according unto all that the Lord commanded him* (Gen. 7:5). What Noah did *not* do, however, was verbalize any anguish or cry out, either in prayer or in protest against God's decision. This should have been the human thing to do, even if Noah understood there to be no real chance of saving the world. Indeed, the sages take Noah to task for this.² It may be said in Noah's defense, however, that having mustered the where-

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withal to do all he was commanded, the burden he shouldered during the first survival phase paralyzed any initiative on his part.

Noah's behavior is critically compared in *Devarim Rabbah* (*V'zot ha-Brakha*, 11:3) with that of Moses, who pleaded with God to spare the Israelites after the sin of the Golden Calf. If one studies the two texts carefully, however, the justification for comparison emerges as questionable. God says to Moses: '*let Me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them*' (Ex. 32:10). *Midrash Tanhuma* 22 explains that this was a clear invitation for Moses *not* to allow God to carry out his tentative plan. Moses understood that the salvation of the Children of Israel was in his hands and his response to God was his refusal to "allow" their destruction and take their place as a scion of a new nation. Moses also had additional cogent arguments (Ex. 32:12-13), that the nations would perceive the destruction of the Israelites as evidence of God's powerlessness to keep His people alive in the desert: *The end of all flesh has come before me*' (Gen. 6:13), on the other hand, clearly reverberates with inevitability; there is no invitation here for a change of heart.

Similarly, the text appears to preclude drawing any true parallel between Noah and Abraham regarding their responses to the news of the impending destruction of the world and Sodom, respectively. Regarding the latter, God said to Abraham (Gen. 18:21): '*I will go down now, and see whether they [the Sodomites] have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me*'. This left open a window of opportunity with respect to the irrevocability of the city's destruction. To claim that Noah did not pray for the world as Abraham did is problematic also for another reason. Avraham does not actually pray for God to save Sodom unconditionally. He rather "cross-examines" God with respect to the number of righteous individuals it would take to save it. God concedes that he would save the city on the merit of ten such people. *Bereishit Rabbah* 49:13 teaches that Abraham actually learned from Noah himself that since Noah and his family were fewer than ten righteous people they could only save themselves. Noah understood praying for his generation under the circumstances would be futile.

IN THE ARK

In the first stage of his survival experience, Noah was in the felt presence of God. Once God sealed the ark and the second survival stage began, Noah was

on his own. No mention of God is made until He commanded Noah to disembark. During this time of *hester panim* (God “hiding His face”), Noah had to assume sole responsibility for his charges. Although the text does not relate how Noah managed in the ark, *Bereishit Rabbah* 31:14 describes the difficulties, and even life-threatening situations Noah endured in tending to all the creatures’ needs. This was a necessary step in preserving the world and a sobering experience for Noah to look beyond his personal burdens and devote himself to caring for others, even those of the animal kingdom. Stressing the significance of this role, despite having been fulfilled under duress, this midrash claims that Noah earned the title righteous [*tzaddik*] only at this point in time. It is remarkable that Noah is the only individual in the Torah who is explicitly called *tzaddik*.

A CHANGE OF COURSE FOR THE WORLD

Against this backdrop, we will now turn to the third and most critical stage of Noah’s survival, where he transforms himself from a reactive to a proactive individual. This transpired as Noah, his family, and all his charges emerged safely from the ark, and witnessed the Earth’s devastation. Like other survivors, Noah probably experienced an emotionally toxic blend of relief and gratitude combined with guilt, perhaps particularly intense in his case due to foreknowledge of the flood.

Noah must surely have reflected on how to ensure a better future for the new world. This is why Noah for the first time acts on his own initiative. The significance of Noah’s actions can only be fully appreciated after careful study of the divine responses generated by his behavior. As we will show, this was Noah’s finest hour and legacy to future generations.

NOAH'S OFFERING

Emerging from the ark, Noah immediately builds an altar and offers sacrifices from the clean animals and birds that were with him in the ark. *Daat Mikra* (Gen. 8:16) points out that Noah was the first to build an altar, manifesting his understanding of the need for sacrificial action. In *Vayikra Rabbah* 25:2, Rabbi Eliezer understands these sacrifices as central to Noah’s essence and legacy, maintaining that Noah’s very name echoes the *reah nihoah*, the sweet savor his sacrifices gave off to God (Gen 8:21). *Midrash ha-Gadol*

(Noah 94:165) notes that by changing only one vowel (not even a letter), the word *vayiven* [he built] (Gen. 8:20) can be read as *vayaven* [he understood]. Thus, it was Noah's understanding of how to seize the moment that could change the course of the world. Indeed, in the very next verse God proclaims that He will never again smite His entire creation. The text clearly indicates a connection between Noah's offering and God's critical decision.

Given that the expression of gratitude and/or request for pardon through a burnt offering is a noble gesture on Noah's part, the question of why Noah's offering was significant enough to evoke a change in God's relationship with creation, nevertheless remains unanswered.

GOD'S PROMISE AND ITS PREMISE

The answer may perhaps be found by comparing the reason God gives for his "change of heart" with the reason He gives for bringing the flood in the first place. Prior to the flood the text states: *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 continually* (Gen. 6:5). The immorality prior to the flood was not the result of the inherent weakness of human nature that gives in from time to time to temptation. It stemmed rather from a total lack of restraint and the perceived legitimacy of satisfying every desire to the fullest without having to account for the consequences. Even prior to God's statement in Genesis 6:5, the text tells us the following: *And the Lord said, 'My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for that he also is flesh'* (Gen. 6:3). Rashi, in his commentary to Genesis 6:3, explains that God would not continue tolerating man's immorality because despite being no more than flesh, man refuses to accept any restraint on this behavior. After God smells the fragrance of Noah's sacrifices, He says: *'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; neither will I again smite any more everything living, as I have done'* (Gen. 8:21). Malbim here explains that indeed, man is still potentially evil but only by inherent inclination and only *from his youth*. Maturity and restraint can facilitate the triumph over evil deeds.³ This makes all the difference.⁴

Noah, from whom future generations would stem, exhibits a new spirit, a spirit of humility, as he initiates an authentic encounter with God. As Rabbi

Jonathan Sacks so eloquently puts it, sacrifices (*korbanot*, derived from the root *K-R-V* “to bring close”) open space for God on man’s turf.⁵ As an individual diminishes his own ego by offering *korbanot*, he makes room for the divine, particularly in the case of Noah, where the sacrifices were *olot* (Gen. 8:20), which are completely burnt and so given over to God. God in response meets man in the space man has created for God. This leads to the next part of the narrative, as God accepts man’s request for unification and offers him an operative partnership. God blesses Noah and invites him and his descendants to work together in securing a moral world.

MAN IN PARTNERSHIP WITH GOD

We now return to God’s invitation to man for a new partnership. Noah and his children are blessed to multiply and fill the earth once more but more importantly, within the same revelation, they are given the responsibility for maintaining morality on earth. After God concedes to man the flesh of the animal in order to separate him and elevate him from the animal kingdom, He not only forbids murder but from now on, holds man accountable for punishing other individuals who commit it: *Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God made He man* (Gen. 9:6). Being in partnership with God means doing what God does, securing morality. It is remarkable that the word commandment does not appear in the text. The text only refers to the blessing God gave man. Being invited to be God’s partner is much more than just a commandment, it is a blessing. God promises not to bring destruction on the world because it will not be necessary, as man will become accountable and prevent the moral deterioration which would necessitate such an action. God puts his faith in man. The significance of the new responsibility placed upon man for his wellbeing and preservation is perhaps reflected in the structure of this part of the narrative which both opens and closes with the blessing of being fruitful and multiplying, sandwiching in the commandment for accountability (although it is not called so).

The finale of God’s response to the *korbanot* is the covenant He makes with Noah and future generations. It is embodied in the rainbow. The word *brit* (with the addition of various prefixes and suffixes) is mentioned seven times in the space of a few verses; this designates it as a key word in the narrative. God carves out an everlasting sign in nature, forever attesting to his

promise that ‘*the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh*’ (Gen. 9:15). Ramban, in his commentary to Genesis 9:12, explains the symbolism in the rainbow: an inverted bow indicates that God will hold his arrows rather than make war on earth. This signifies a true trusting and loving relationship in which wrongdoing can be tolerated without tearing the covenant asunder.

Clearly God does not need reminders to keep his promise; man however does and the rainbow is truly for him. The sages have instituted a blessing which is to be made when a rainbow is seen: blessing God for keeping His covenant with man.⁶ TB *Berakhot* 59a teaches that when an individual sees a rainbow, he should prostrate himself, as he is in the presence of the divine. TB *Hagiga* 16a maintains that because the divine presides in the rainbow, one should refrain from staring at it. The rainbow is a sign for man to reaffirm his humility and show gratitude for being God’s partner in a covenant that allows him to continue to flourish within his imperfection.

It is true that after his finest hour, Noah falls into a drunken stupor in which he curses his grandson, with potentially negative repercussions for the future. The text relates this episode as it is also part of the survival syndrome which can bring out not only the best but also the worst in man. Noah relapsed into that unfortunate state of loss of control and thus left the stage of history. Although Noah bears responsibility for his actions, this event does not overshadow the enduring legacy he left for man.

NOAH’S LEGACY

This paper focuses on Noah’s legacy. Rather than pondering the degree of Noah’s righteousness and his failure to save or pray for his generation, it attempts to explicate his triumph over a traumatic survival by securing the salvation of future generations, thus achieving closure. In this vein, *Midrash Tanhumah* (Noah 6) interprets the seemingly redundant repetition of Noah’s name –*These are the generations of Noah, Noah was . . . righteous and wholehearted* (Gen. 6:9) – as designed to give Noah equal standing to Abraham, Jacob, and Moses (whose names are also repeated). *Bereishit Rabbah* 31:1 states this serves as no less than a universal edict to refrain from casting aspersions on Noah, and maintains that the verse *the righteous man is an everlasting foundation* (Prov. 10:25) refers specifically to Noah.

Noah does something of major impact; he “convinces” God that man is ready for moral accountability by accepting the undisputed necessity of man’s accountability, not only for his personal morality but also for that of the society, for the sake of preserving the world. God is “convinced” and partners with man in shaping morality to ensure our world never returns to the pre-diluvian state. This is Noah’s legacy.

NOTES

1. See *Or ha-Haim*, to Genesis 6:13.
 2. For example, see *Zohar*, Noah, pp. 67- 68.
 3. See also S. Spero, “Why Was God Optimistic After the Flood?” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 30:4 (October – December 2002) p. 240.
 4. In this vein, the *Akedat Yitzchak* (*Bereshit Shaar* 14) explains that *re’ah* [fragrance] and *ru’ah* [spirit] have the same consonants and thus *re’ah* can also be read as *ru’ah*. If this is the case, God “smelled” a new spirit of man.
 5. J. Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2015) pp. 61-83
 6. *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orakh Hayyim* 229:1.

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