

## Torah Talk: Noah and Starting Over

R: Hi, I'm Robbin

B: And I'm Brion. And this is our interpretation

R: Our midrash

B: About this week's Torah portion, which is about Noah.

R: Noah was a righteous man - he was blameless in his age.

B: Many of us know the basic story – God told Noah to build an ark, animals came two by two to get on the ark, it rained

R: a lot

B: Everyone else died, the rain stopped,

R: then Noah let out a dove to look to see if it could find any dry land. It comes back with an olive branch in its claw and Noah lets all the animals out,

B: God creates a rainbow as a sign that God will never again destroy the world and we live happily ever after.

R: We chose this week's Torah portion

B: this week's parashat

R: not because it's one of the most well-known stories in the Torah,

B: not because we had a particular inkling of a deep meaning buried in the text,

R: and not because it was the only Friday night in October that we were both available.

B: No – we chose this portion, because my middle name is Noah, my Hebrew name is Noach

R: and we figured that was as good a reason as any to pick this week's portion.

B: So we've been studying,

R: quite a bit in fact.

B: Reading various articles about this Torah portion,

R: examining it word by word,

B: well examining the various translations word by word which often led us a little bit astray.

R: We found a lot of things that we didn't know and I'm sure a lot of things that you didn't know either.

B: The whole thing starts with these words:

R: "[God] saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

B: [God] regretted that [God] had made human beings on the earth, and [God's] heart was deeply troubled. So [God] said –

R: "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created, and with them, the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground, for I regret that I have made them."

B: But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord."

R: But did you know ... Noah did not only bring two of every animal onto the ark?

B: He brought seven pairs of the clean animals. And do you know what those clean animals were for?

R: After his awesome journey, to thank God for sparing him and his family, Noah makes sacrifices.

B: If he had not brought some extra animals, any sacrifices would've killed off an entire species.

R: Of course even those animals that were sacrificed were luckier than almost all the other animals on the earth.

B: This aspect certainly didn't seem fair.

R: Even if all of humanity -except for Noah - had become corrupt and evil, did God really need to drown almost all the dogs and cats and lions and tigers and bears?

B: Oh my!

R: Well you get the point. And how come they never mention Noah's wife's name? Who is Mrs. Noah? And what about the wives of the sons? Maybe the writers of the Torah are the world's first sexist pigs!

B: Wait – can we say pigs in Temple?

R: But tonight we'd like to talk about one aspect of the story,

B: one part that intrigued us and left us with more questions than answers.

R: And it's all about starting over.

B: Starting fresh. For that's what God is doing here.

R: Having created all of the universe and mankind, God looks at what was created, and it's not a pretty sight.

B: Mankind has become evil. Noah stands unique in this corrupt world as a righteous man.

R: And God decides that this little experiment - this creation of the universe and mankind - didn't quite go as expected.

B: So God goes for a do over – a fresh start. It reminded me of a project I did back in college many years ago. We had to build a tiny computer from wires and chips. All it could do was multiply two small numbers together. You did this using something called a breadboard and the result looked something like the picture on the display.

And so I thought about the project for a little while, and started putting everything together. And when everything was ready, I turned it on - and nothing happened. I looked at the jumble of wires – I didn't know what to do now. And I stared at it. And stared at it. And tried to figure out – what did I do wrong, and how am I going to fix it? And I stared at it some more. And finally, I ripped out all the wires and I disconnected all of the chips – and I started over.

But the second time, I knew I needed to do things a differently. I started with a detailed plan showing every connection I needed to make between the different electronic components. And every time I put a wire in place, I recorded exactly what I had done and which connection corresponded to which line on my sketch. And when I had everything all wired up – and I turned it on – it didn't work again. But now, I knew what I was trying to do, I had a diagram I could follow, and I could start understanding the problems and fixing them. A few minutes later – it worked. And I could multiply 2 times 2. The answer is 4, incidentally.

R: And here's my starting over story: Since today is my anniversary...of my divorce...I thought it only made sense to talk about this as my fresh start. I got married when I was 22. I didn't have much self-confidence and I was thrilled that someone actually wanted to marry me – without asking myself if he was even the right person for me. After having 3 sons, it was more than apparent that my marriage wasn't going to last. I was divorced at the age of 37. Ending my marriage was a very big deal. It was as painful to me as washing away an entire society. I was figuratively drowning. But after my personal storm ended, I started all over again. I was more experienced, I was smarter and I knew what was best for me this time around. When I started dating again, I knew that things were going to be different. This time, I knew that I mattered too. I wanted someone who treated me with love and respect – a new and beautiful concept for me.

Starting over was painful, but absolutely necessary for my survival. And in the end, I am blessed with a more loving, peaceful and much happier life.

B: So just like Robbin and I, God decides to start over.

R: And after the flood, God says, in Chapter 8: "Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devising of man's mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done."

B: And then again in chapter 9, God makes his covenant with Noah and his offspring and the animals and says "Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

R: So God makes this promise more than once. Does God feel that flooding the earth was a mistake?

B: Maybe this is the first example of Jewish guilt.

R: And God knows, as I'm sure all of us know, if you don't change anything, you're probably going to get the same result that you got before.

B: As Benjamin Franklin supposedly said: "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

R: So what does God change?

B: What does God do differently the second time to make sure that the situation doesn't deteriorate again?

R: What does God do differently so that mankind doesn't become evil and selfish and out-of-control?

B: As Robbin and I interpreted what we read, God appears to make two changes:

R: The text says, after Noah and his family are back on dry land:

[God says ...]The fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky – everything with which the earth is astir – and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given in to your hand ... Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you".

B: And later God says:

Whoever sheds the blood of man,  
By man shall his blood be shed;

For in His image  
Did God make man

R: So God has done two things to change the situation.

B: First, God declares that man is superior to the plants and animals and will rule over them.

R: And secondly, God sets out a rule – a law.

B: God declares that anyone, or anything such as an animal, that draws blood from a human, shall have blood drawn from them.

R: God adds that this is because humans were created in God's image. Humans, not the other animals, are superior and created in God's image.

B: So the question has to be – why does God believe that these changes will stop man from becoming inherently evil as happened the first time?

R: Why would making humans feel superior to the rest of the animal kingdom prevent humans from becoming evil and selfish again?

B: Why does requiring punishment for one human who hurts another necessarily stop the previous decay into chaos?

R: In stating the need for punishing anyone or any animal that hurts another human, God has given us the rule of law.

B: Or at least the first law.

R: God knows that laws, and the obedience of those laws, prevents widespread corruption and evil.

B: By requiring punishment for humans who hurt other humans, we as a society can stop evil from getting a foothold.

R: We can respect law.

B: We can respect righteousness.

R: And we can force ourselves to suppress our evil tendencies because we understand the consequences.

B: And why must humans feel superior to the animal world?

R: Because we do know better.

B: We know right from wrong.

R: We are not animals.

B: We understand morality.

R: And by separating us from the animals – by declaring our uniqueness within the animal kingdom – we can't ignore our conscience and act like animals.

B: We are different – we are aware that we are different – and that difference forces us to acknowledge that we understand when we have done something wrong.

R: We can't just act like an animal that is unaware.

B: One of our favorite parts of the Noah story is when, at the end of the journey, when Noah and his family are back on dry land, and God has realized the need to make the changes we've discussed, God pledges that this wiping out all living things won't happen again.

R: So starting over is actually the easy way out.

B: This time God is committed to establishing a universe with mankind that will work.

R: By ruling out the possibility of another do over, God is suggesting that moving forward, mankind (and womankind) will have to work through these issues and make society work.

B: It's now our responsibility to figure out how to deal with evil in the world, with hatred, with selfishness, with our tendencies towards cruelty.

R: We are not animals that can just do what we want, ignoring the consequences or impacts on others.

B: We need laws to govern our behavior and we need to take responsibility for the world and everything that lives here.

R: God isn't going to solve the problem next time by wiping out all of the badness.

B: We humans have that responsibility now.

R: And to show this promise to the world, God shows a rainbow to Noah.

B: And God declares that a rainbow will always be a sign of this promise to mankind,

R: to let us work through our issues,

B: to find our own ways to deal with evil tendencies,

R: to make our own laws and run our own society... A rainbow.

B: And despite all the technology in our world today,

R: despite the advanced computer graphics in our movies

B: despite the powerful computers in our pockets we call phones

R: despite the medical advances which have let us live nearly twice as long as we typically lived only a few hundred years ago,

B: despite all this, we still stop and stare whenever we see a rainbow.

R: It's magical - that arch of color across the sky after a rain.

B: When we see a rainbow, we stop and stare and marvel at its majesty.

R: Oh sure, we can look it up on Wikipedia, and see how it has something to do with the way that the light refracts off the raindrops that are still in the air.

B: But that doesn't remove the magic.

R: That doesn't remove the mystery.

B: It still is beautiful array of colors – only visible for a short while.

R: And it still takes our breath away.

B: And as Robbin and I talked about the rainbow, we both realized how, in different ways, it's a lot like our belief in Judaism. There's something magic there.

R: Something beyond the rules – something beyond the physics – something we don't necessarily want to understand better.

B: But there's a beauty to be found in believing that there is something bigger and better than just being animals in this world.

R: To me, rainbows are just like God – hard to explain and magical. And even though I can't explain exactly how rainbows or God exists, I still feel moved and connected to its beauty.

B: And when we see that beauty – it takes our breath away

R: every time.

Pictures

