

OPEN SCROLL

An Undergraduate Parshah Sheet for the Harvard Hillel Community

Parshat Noach

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Jonathan Mizrahi

Two years ago, in the prime of my SCM gabbai career, I had to prepare a last minute d'var Torah for parshat Noach when my dear friend, Peter Ganong, decided to be MIA for Shabbat. Those of you who know me well, recognize that I usually don't have much to say about the weekly parsha (or any of the Torah for that matter). So, I spoke that Friday evening about Noah and his ark as a beautiful example of sustainable environmentalism. Noah, having spent weeks and weeks with his family and countless animals in this bio-dome of an ark, presumably had to deal with everything from feeding animals to cleaning up their feces. Shockingly, I received only a handful of "Yasher Koachs," and SCM'ers understood my d'var only as an excuse for me to talk about poop.

So here I am again, struggling to find something interesting to say about this parsha. Naturally, I'll turn to the other interesting episode of Noah's life. We are told that after his descent from the ark, he immediately planted a vineyard and then proceeded to get drunk. His son Ham then "saw his nakedness" (and questionably castrated or sodomized Noah, according to the Talmud). The result? Ham and his Canaanite descendants are cursed for eternity.

Ok. So let's summarize what's happened. God is

disappointed with the world and all of its wickedness, but he likes Noah. He saves Noah, his three sons and their wives as the only living human beings for the future. Now, Noah screws up and gets drunk, and one of his three sons gets cursed for eternity! We're left with two "good" men (Shem and Yaphet) and three wives. But in the patriarchal text that is the Torah, there are only two righteous people left. We seem to have a bigger problem. If half of even the good people on earth were prone to failure, what can we learn about the nature of humans? Do most of us suck? Are almost all of us destined to anger God? I'd like to think that this isn't the case, but this parsha doesn't offer us too much hope.

Thankfully, people like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca come later to offer us a slightly more encouraging paradigm of human nature. At least the rest of Genesis is fun and promising. But where do we leave the story of Noah? Perhaps we can entertain ourselves with the elementary school version – you know, where it ends with the rainbow. That would be nice – and almost environmental.

Jonathan Mizrahi '10 is an Economics Concentrator in Quincy House. He is also a former Gabbai of SCM.

Rachel Zax

The flood of Parshat Noach is the most monumental episode of destruction that we find in the Torah, completely obliterating life as it was. As Noah disembarks from his ark, God promises that He will never again bring a great flood to destroy the earth. Does this mean, perhaps, that humankind will never again descend as far into wickedness as the pre-flood generation, or maybe that even if it does, He will never again demolish the world because of this? What is the meaning of this promise?

If we look back on the first several chapters of the book of Bereishit, a certain trend emerges: man is originally placed in paradise, but with each successive sin, God punishes him by removing him another step further from this ideal existence. Adam and Eve are set in the Garden of Eden, with all of their needs provided for, until they eat from the Tree of Knowledge. God then expels them and condemns humanity to face death and to labor throughout life. In the next generation, Cain kills his brother Abel; God punishes him by denying him even the security of working the soil. Instead, Cain is to be a wanderer on the earth. By the time of the generation of the flood, humankind's wickedness is so great that God is said to have regretted creating man, and He brings a flood that destroys the entire earth and all the living beings it contains, save those on Noah's ark.

After the flood, we see a new paradigm for God's treatment of humankind. When Noah disembarks from the ark, he is immediately situated within the harsh reality of the world, rather than a paradise like Adam and Eve's. The Torah calls Noah "the man of the earth," and God instructs him to replenish

it; rather than handing him a comfortable, self-sufficient world in a garden, God expects Noah and his descendants to work the earth, and to spread and populate it, from the very start. After Creation, man had originally been placed in a state of perfection, and God punished him accordingly whenever he failed to meet the expectations of perfection that came along with it. But now, after the flood, Noah begins a kind of life in which humankind's relation to the world is in a more stable balance.

Immediately following the flood, we see that people's wickedness continues, but the way that God responds to their sins has changed. Noah's first act after descending from the ark is to plant a vineyard. Some time later, Noah drinks too much wine, and his son finds him lying naked in his tent and disgraces him. Noah then curses his son, saying that his descendants should be slaves. This curse is akin to the punishments that God used to mete out when man proved himself unworthy of his current station – but here it is not God issuing the curse, only Noah. Humankind soon transgresses again by building the Tower of Babel, in an act of rebellion against God. God steps in by giving the nations different languages and scattering them across the earth, but although this intervention changes the world dynamic, it does not lower humankind's status in the world.

Perhaps, then, God brought the flood only to wash away the old paradigm, in which human failure and divine retribution led to a constant downward spiral. We can thus think of the flood as the signal of a new era, in which humankind begins in a more appropriate position in the world and is able to meet

Rachel Zax (continued)

the expectations that this position sets forth. We might think we would prefer the relatively peaceful, easy existence of Adam and others of earlier generations, but we can understand God's promise never again to destroy the earth as an assurance that we're now living in the right paradigm, that we are meant to exist in a

way that forces us to labor in and engage with the world.

Rachel Zax '12 is a Mathematics Concentrator in Pforzheimer House. Special thanks to Arun Viswanath '13 for his help in probing some of the above ideas.

Emily Shire

This week's torah reading, parshat Noach, certainly is filled with a mix of emotions and messages. This famous passage and the great flood raise a number of issues about G-d's relationship with humans, particularly when it comes to expectations, power, and compassion. Yet, the parshah is not only about G-d and Noah, or even G-d and humanity, but rather there is another important character, the earth itself. The earth, its destruction, and subsequent renewal are a reflection and dependent on humans' relationship with G-d. The earth is also the intermediary through which G-d communicates his disapproval and, quite importantly, later establishes his covenant.

The earth plays a central role from the very start of the portion. Parshat Noach begins with G-d deciding to destroy the whole earth and all its inhabitants.. G-d's reasoning is that the earth has become so vile and corrupt that it and its inhabitants must be, quite literally, washed away for the earth to be redeemed. deeming that "the earth became corrupt...[and] filled with lawlessness" (Genesis 6: 11-12). G-d makes it clear that he is not just planning to kill humans, but "all flesh under the sky in which there is a breath of life" (Genesis 6:17). The purpose of the flood is not solely to punish humans with death, but to make the earth completely inhospitable to life so that even animals will perish.

There are interesting earth-related implications of G-d's decisions. One is that a connection is quickly established in the parshah between human's personal behavior and their use of the earth. People's evilness of sin and corruption causes G-d to feel the earth must be started anew. G-d believes that the key to correcting the disappointing ways humans behave is to destroy the earth, creating a relationship between how people act, whether it is loitering or cheating their neighbors, as having a direct effect on the physicality and sustainability of the earth. G-d's decision suggests that while destroying the earth may be a way to teach a lesson, it may also be that he feels the current humanity has not proven themselves responsible and honorable enough in their interactions with each other to handle the responsibility and be deserving of his gift of the earth.

This conception is confirmed by the fact that G-d chooses to spare only Noah, his sons and their wives, and, essentially, just enough animals to repopulate and provide sustenance. Noah earns this great protection because G-d believed that "Noah was a righteous man...Noah walked with G-d" (Genesis 6:9). When G-d looks upon humanity, he regrets having made man (Genesis 6:6). But, in this sea of disappointment, he finds hope with Noah and trusts him. Thus, it makes sense that Noah and his family are spared, not only because G-d believes he has earned his life, but also that he is trustworthy and honorable enough to take care of the new world. In sparing Noah, G-d not

only gives him a gift, but a huge responsibility, as well, with the charge of rebuilding this new, hopefully better, world.

Interestingly, G-d seems to view humans and the earth differently after the flood. G-d declares a covenant, a word that carries powerful implications in the Torah and that has strong connections to the other, somewhat more famous covenant, that with Abraham. G-d says "I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that is with you-birds, cattle, and every wild beast-all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth.... 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" (Genesis 9: 9-11). First, this covenant is not just with Noah or humans, but to every living creature, stressing again how much G-d values all the earth. Also, G-d's covenant shows how G-d is moved by the destruction of the earth that he makes a promise never to do so again.

Like any covenant, though, it is not just what one party agrees to, but what both promise to each other. G-d promises never to destroy the earth and all of human life again, but what is humanity's end of the contract? Although there is no stated, explicit command to Noah in regards to this covenant, the implication as the one man whose family was spared is that he will honor and take care of the earth. Furthermore, G-d has renewed the earth, both in terms of the quality of humanity but also the physicality of the flora and fauna. The earth embodies how G-d wants to give humanity and all of life another start. The earth is essential to the covenant. It is key to establishing and maintaining G-d's relationship with humanity.

Today, more than ever, we cannot forget what a gift the world is to us, nor the fact that is our responsibility to take care of it. We must remember this in the way we interact with others so that we do not fall to "corrupt" ways, but it also applies in the way we physically respect the earth. The organization 350 (www.350.org) approached Open Scroll about connecting this week's parsha to environmentalism. The organization takes its name from the fact that 350 is the maximum parts per million of carbon that NASA climate scientist James Hansen declared necessary in order "to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted." G-d renewed the earth and gave humanity another chance to develop and a new responsibility to protect this treasure. This parsha reminds us of the great environmental responsibilities that continue to this day and how we, as well, are part of a covenant to respect and protect the earth.

Emily Shire '10 is a History and Literature Concentrator in Eliot House. She is also the Vice President for Community Building.

If you would like to contribute to Open Scroll or have questions or comments, please email Nell Hawley '10-11 at nshawley@fas.harvard.edu.

Content Editor: Nell Hawley '10-11

Design Editor: Sarah Joselow '10