

"HELLO, CRUEL WORLD"

For forty days and nights the heavens opened and the rains came. Then, for some one-hundred and fifty days, the waters rose. The world was engulfed in a cataclysm, and all living things were drowned in their watery graves. Afterwards, the waters receded, and the earth was turned into a mushy swamp. Finally, as Noah's ark rested on Mount Ararat, he heard the divine command: "God spoke to Noah, saying: Tzei min ha-tevah, Go out of the ark."

A careful reading of this passage indicates that apparently Noah was averse to leaving his ark. After all, for several periods of seven days each he had sent out birds to test the quality of the land, and decided that it is better to stay indoors. At the end, he did not leave until he heard a direct order by God to do so. He needed a divine command to eject him from his ark.

Philo, the Midrash, and Ibn Ezra, among others, all wonder why Noah was so reluctant to leave. After all, I imagine that had I been cooped up with the same people and with all those animals in a floating menagerie for twelve months, I would be extremely anxious to get out and place my feet on earth again.

The commentaries offer various answers, but none of them is completely satisfactory.

Let us search for an answer by putting ourselves in Noah's place. That should not be too difficult. Because, in a manner of speaking, we too have almost had a Noah-experience. Mutatis mutandis, we Jews are just emerging from our ark, surveying the terrain, discovering death and destruction in so many families we know, and, even more, becoming suddenly and precipitously aware of the flood of fire that engulfed and almost destroyed our people.

I find several reasons, as a result of this psychological identification with Noah, why he would not want to leave the ark. I discover the elements of fear, despair, weariness at having to start all over again, even feelings of guilt. But, because of lack of time, allow me to concentrate on one special reaction that I suspect Noah had -- because I experienced it in our analogous situation.

I believe that Noah was reluctant to leave his ark because of disgust. He must have surveyed the land about him and noticed painfully how this beautiful world had been destroyed, how all the magnificence of nature and the achievements of

man had been turned to naught -- all because of the irresponsibility, the immorality, the petty thievery of his contemporaries. He must have looked at this deluge -- soaked ruin that the earth had become, and shuddered in revulsion at the kind of people who brought this on. He probably thought to himself that it is preferable to remain in the company of honest beasts rather than to walk even amongst the remains of such false humans. Touching earth again made him relive his profound disappointments in his fellow men, and he wished to stay on the ark.

I can sympathize with Noah. Having lived through the past three weeks, who is not disappointed in Homo Sapiens? What Jew would want to embrace this treacherous hypocritical world?

The Rabbis speak of the flood brought on because of the sin of those who used to steal pahot mi-shaveh perutah, articles worth less than a penny. And then they speak not only of mabbul shel mayim, the flood of water that engulfed the world in the days of Noah, but also the threat of Mabbul Shel esh, the flood of fire.

We are, all of us, sick and disgusted by the Mabbul shel mayim, the petty thievery that has brought on, if not a flood of water, then a flood of Watergate revelations. They are sickening to all of us.

But far more consequential, far more disastrous, infinitely more evil, is the duplicity in international politics which threatens to bring a mabbul shel esh, a flood of fire onto the world and especially onto the Jewish people. Watergate remains indeed a petty crime when compared with the enormity of the blasphemous collusion that now threatens us with the fire of Soviet missiles' bombs.

Consider this: when Israel was first attacked from two sides, during these fateful 24 or 48 hours, and the United States bought in a cease-fire proposal to the Security Council, it could hardly find one other government to go along with it. There were all kinds of discussions and conversations, and we were told that they could not agree on a cease-fire resolution until "the military situation is clarified." What incredible rot, what transparent hypocrisy! What they meant -- and any intelligent 10-year old knew it -- was that they first had to find out who was winning the battle. If the Israelis were winning, they would call an immediate cease-fire in order to limit its victories. If the Egyptians and Syrians were winning, they would let them continue until they finished off Israel.

And our great Western allies: France, la belle France! They have become the successors to India and Krishna Menon as the paragons of pious duplicity, of sanctimonious self-righteousness, of moral unctuousness. And France continues to maintain that the Mirages it sends to Lybia are not meant for combat. Apparently, they are meant merely for the entertainment of Lybia's dictator who likes to play with jet planes.

England, that land of civilization and gentlemen, continues to play the same game it always has: when you are out of the government, you are a pro-Israel Zionist, and when you are in the government you are pro-Arab. And it does not matter whether you are Tory or Labor.

And those primitive African nations, bribed by oil, who do not have the elementary decency to break relations with Israel and keep quiet, but have to float ads in the NEW YORK TIMES, maintaining that their enmity towards Israel is not because of oil, but because of the issues -- and here they repeat the ritualistic inanities about Israel, mimicking the Arabs. And these nations have the unmitigated gall to call themselves "non-aligned!"

Greece and Turkey, which have been greased and fattened by United States help, will not allow their great benefactor to come to the help of an embattled small ally.

And Germany - ah Germany! What marvelous progress! Thirty years ago Germans killed and others were passive spectators, surveying the massacre of Jews with glossy eyes, and never raising a voice in protest. Now the Germans have climbed up the moral ladder. Now others are doing the killing, while Germany stands by as the passive spectator refusing to help!

When Moses took the Children of Israel out of Egypt to Palestine he pleaded with the leaders of Edom: Naavrah na be'artzekha, permit us to go through your land; we will not harm anything and we will pay for everything. But Edom refused. And so these contemporary descendants of Edom, these modern reincarnations of Esau and all that he stands for, refuse to allow Israel even air-space above their territories!

And the United Nations -- what an abominable exercise in low comedy! The Security Council has become a forum in which people revile each other in obscene language, in which delegates rush at each other in fist fights, and open their jackets to bear gun-holsters. International delegates have become

armed thugs, and the Security Council is characterised by brawls that would disgrace a self-respecting saloon. A world form steeped in double-think and obvious anti-Semitism!

So there is a tendency for us to clam up, to shut ourselves in, to remain enclosed in our own cocoons, to turn sour on the world. We react with disgust and revulsion. We build ourselves psychological arks, constructed from emotional strands of disgust and revulsion and fear and despair and weariness, and we prefer to remain away, remote from the world.

Yet, the divine command calls out to us tzei min ha-tevah, get out of that ark. What shall we do? The answer is you must reassess your understanding of man. It is quite possible that your disappointment in man was so great because your expectations were too high. You, Noah, must no longer entertain such extravagant notions about man's capacities. You have been too idealistic and too romantic.

Note this: God encourages Noah to a more realistic view by telling him that, as it were, God too had a mistaken notion of what man could accomplish. The divine judgement is issued: Yetzer lev haadam ra mi'neurav, I have just "discovered" that the inclination of man's heart is evil from his very infancy. God says: from now on man need no longer be a vegetarian, he may eat meat. I had imagined heretofore that man could rise to a higher level (to the level where he can exist without spilling blood) by himself. Now I see that I must compromise. I must allow this gluttonous, blood-thirsty human to bite into meat and let the blood soil his mouth and his heart, and perhaps in that way allay his blood-lust for his fellow human. But one minimum standard I insist upon: no murder of fellow man.

So, become realistic! Do not expect too much, but keep your minimum ideals alive.

For us, that means that we must do away with our old liberal pipe-dream about the capacity of the human community to transcend its Yetzer, its own self-interest at all costs. No more must we turn our eyes heavenward and put on a pious mien when we recite that liberal litany about the UN representing "the family of nations." Family of nations indeed! But there are families and there are families; there are good families and there are Mafia families! And the UN has proved itself to be a Mafia family of Nations!

No more must we permit ourselves messianic fervor in speaking of the international community, as if a large collection of individual nation-rogues can merely, by virtue of its size, become saintly.

We must recognize that cynicism and deceit and duplicity are part of the game, and we must not expect it to be otherwise.

But we must continue to use our ideals realistically. We must continue to insist that man is created in the tzellem Elohim, in the image of God, and we must always strive to enhance that image -- even if we are the only ones to do so. Because that is our burden, and that is our glory.

So Noah teaches us something about our own condition today. Despair and guilt and disgust all make us turn away from the world and the tasks at hand. It is a justifiable reaction, and yet the divine command issues to him: tzei min ha-tevah. God forces us out of our psychological and emotional arks and prods us to reenter the stream of events, in effect to say "hello" to the cruel world, and go about our business wiser if sadder.

These have been traumatic weeks, and we shall have to rethink them, reexamine ourselves, indulge in national self-criticism, and ask new questions. But despite our own well-founded reluctance to take on new tasks, we shall have to emerge into the new situations with resolve, vigour, vitality and, above all, a proper combination of realism and idealism.

And like Noah who was commanded to leave the ark and confront the world in all its cruelty, so may we be the recipients of va-yevarekh Elohim et Noah, the divine blessing.