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Subject: from uzi on noach
Date: Tue, 04 Nov 1997 00:45:42
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Hello Rabbi Lamm,

I hope you had a good stay in Israel and a safe trip home. This piece on Noach went out on Friday to the readers on the list, but not to you. I printed it out and brought it to the Plaza Hotel to hand deliver it. Then I found out you were no longer there. I am now sending it by e-mail.

BTW, on Friday two interviews with you appeared in the Israeli press, one in Yom Hashishi and the other in Makor Rishon. Is it true that you said that Reform Judaism has no future? I want to first hear from you directly about this before responding.

Enclosed is the piece on Noach, which I hope you enjoy.

Best wishes for a good winter,

Uzi Weingarten

LESSONS FROM THE PARABLE OF THE FLOOD
 Rabbi Uziel Weingarten

In the Breishit study I suggested that the opening Biblical accounts, until Abraham, are not history but rather metaphors that convey valuable lessons about life. The legitimacy for this approach is provided in the Talmudic discussion about Job, in which one of the Sages claims that "Job never existed; the story is a parable" (Bava Batra 15A). According to this opinion, the author of Job wanted to discuss the dilemma of bad things happening to good people. He framed the issue as a story, not to teach history but as a literary convention. We also saw that the "snake" of the Garden of Eden story was understood by various commentaries to be the evil inclination, thus turning that account, as well, into a parable.

In the account of the Flood, the word "all" appears in very high concentration. The cause of the Flood is that "all the desires of [humanity's] thoughts are only evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5). God responds to this "all" with a Divine "all": "the end of all flesh has come before Me...to destroy all flesh...all on earth will die...I will wipe out all that exists...all the high mountains under all the heavens were covered...all creatures that move on earth and all humanity died. All that has the breathe of life in it from all that is on dry land died...wiped out all that is on that face of the earth..." (ibid. 6:13-7:23). Eleven times the Torah emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of the Flood.

But the Sages empowered themselves greatly in interpreting the Torah. In the face of the verse that "all the high mountains under all the heavens were covered" (ibid. 7:19), Rabbi Levi taught that the Land of Israel was not affected by the Flood (Bereishit Rabbah 33:6). Bar Kappara taught that there were other survivors in addition to Noah and his family (Bereishit Rabbah 42:8; Rashi to Genesis 14:13). This, in spite of the Torah's eight-fold repetition, quoted above, that all living beings except those in Noah's ark perished.

It is worth considering the implications of these teachings. If the Land of Israel was not flooded, then did the waters, fifteen cubits higher than the tallest mountains (Genesis 7:20), simply stop at the international border, ignoring the laws of physics? Or does it perhaps mean that the countries surrounding Israel were also not deluged?

And according to Bar Kapparah, who taught that somebody outside the ark survived, was he the only survivor, or were there others? Rabbi Levi would claim that there were many others, namely all the inhabitants of Israel, which he believed was spared from the Flood.

But if the Flood did not cover the whole earth, and if there were survivors other than Noah, to what conclusions does this lead us? The result of these teachings is that the account of the Flood is completely deconstructed, with the event transformed from a global cataclysm to a local upheaval. It does seem that these Rabbis took it as a metaphor.

It thus does not matter if we find no geological evidence that there was a Flood around 4,000 years ago. Nor does it matter that a similar story appears in other ancient Near East cultures. The Torah borrowed a myth and used it as a metaphor. What matters is the wisdom that we can derive from the story. Let us now consider some of those lessons.

SHIFTING PARADIGMS: GOD'S COVENANT AFTER THE FLOOD

In the aftermath of the flood God makes a covenant with human beings. It takes the form of a unilateral commitment: "God decided: I will never again curse the earth on account of humanity, because the desires of humanity's thoughts are evil from their youth, and I will never again destroy all living things as I have done" (ibid. 8:21).

The double promise, not to curse the earth and not to destroy all living things, refers to God's two earlier reactions. In the Garden of Eden story, God told Adam that "the earth is cursed on your account" (ibid. 3:17). Later on, when the earth was filled with hamas, violence, God destroyed all life with the flood (ibid. 6:13). God now commits to never again react in such a way.

The reason given for this is that "the desires of humanity's thoughts are evil from their youth." But wasn't that the reason for bringing the Flood in the first place? At the end of last week's reading, we read that "God saw that the evil of humanity in the world is great, and that all the desires of his thoughts are only evil all the time" (ibid. 6:5). The result is that "God regretted creating humans in the world, and was sad. God said: I will wipe out the humans that I created...for I regret having made them" (ibid. 6:6-7).

So the observation that "people's thoughts are evil" leads to opposite conclusions. Before the Flood this situation is judged to be intolerable, and humanity is condemned and destroyed. After the Flood, when the same facts are seen from a different perspective, the assessment changes. God accepts human nature and commits to never again destroy humanity.

A similar pattern emerges in the Golden Calf incident. After Israel sinned, God told Moses: "I have seen this nation, and it

is a stiff-necked nation. Now allow Me, and I will be angry at them and destroy them" (Exodus 32:9-10). Israel's stubbornness brought God to seek to destroy them. A little while later, however, Moses used the same assessment to arrive at the opposite conclusion: "May God go among us, since [Israel] is a stiff-necked nation, and forgive our sins and mistakes and take us for an inheritance" (ibid. 34:9). God and Moses shared the same judgment, but drew very different conclusion from it. One lesson that can be derived from this is that we need to exercise care before deciding on our course of action. In the first place, we do not always have all the facts. Even when we do, when seen in different contexts they can lead to different assessments. Even when two parties agree on both the facts and the judgments, they can still arrive at very different conclusions, as God and Moses did after the Golden Calf incident.

This brings to mind the oldest teaching of the Oral Tradition, from the Great Assembly. Their first teaching is, he-vu metunim ba-din, "Be patient in judgment" (Avot 1:1).

Commentaries on the Mishnah point out that while the teaching is initially directed to judges, it applies equally to all of us as we "judge" various situations. Human reality is multi-dimensional, and things tend to be more complex than they initially appear. This is especially true when considering a course of action that might be hurtful to others.

The story of the Flood strikes a careful balance. On one hand, it does not deconstruct ethics. The Hamas, violent injustice, that caused the Flood (Genesis 6:11,13) remains ethically unacceptable. That we are vulnerable to temptation does not blur the line between right and wrong.

But the Torah reminds us that in addition to a value system, there are other components in our decision making. And life is not like the parable of the Flood. In a parable, the characters learn what they need to learn and nobody gets hurt. In life, if we hurt somebody because of incomplete information, or unrealistic expectations, or overly harsh judgment, the damage is real and not always easily undone. Sometimes it cannot be undone at all.

This story thus calls upon us to exercise care before condemning somebody, and certainly before taking action, be it physical action or verbal action. We are reminded of the complexity of life, and that things are not always what they seem to be.

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November's wisdom of the Sages:
God arranged the mitzvot as a candle to make our actions integritous and a light to illuminate the paths of honesty.

Most of the laws of the Torah are simply advice from afar from the great Counselor, to correct personality traits and make our actions integritous.

(Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, end of Sefer Kedusah and Sefer Korbanot,