

Shabbat Noach – 9 October 2021

In Parashat Noach, the central theme is that G-d decides that the world has gone bad, the people have failed, and G-d is going to do something about it. Genesis Chapter 6 v.11 says: 'And the earth was corrupted before G-d, and the earth was filled with violence.' G-d decides to start again, and destroy most of the humans, animals and birds. In Chapter 6 v.13, G-d says: 'The end of all flesh has come before me, because the earth is filled with violence because of them.' However, G-d spares Noah because he is seen as 'virtuous' and he, his offspring and wives are chosen to spearhead a new society. G-d tells Noah, Chapter 7 v.2: "of all the pure animals, take seven pairs, man and his woman, and of the animals that are not pure, two, man and his woman," because it says in the next verse: 'to keep seed alive on the face of all the earth.' The sea creatures are exempt, they have not 'sinned' or 'failed' in G-d's eyes. It's interesting that G-d saves the clean **and** the unclean animals, more of the clean because they are needed for sacrifices, but the unclean are also saved. Why?

I wonder if today we were given the power to 'save' society and the world, what choices do we imagine we might make? Would we do away with all the 'bad' people - the ones who do bad things or even maybe people we don't agree with or like? And what about the animals? Would we keep the nice 'cute' ones and get rid of the unpleasant ones like fleas, rats, lice and flies? Is it dangerous to get rid of humans and animals because we don't like or approve of them?

This brought to mind a story I heard about what happened to wolves in the U.S. in the late 19th/early 20th century. Wolves used to be commonplace in the Western United States, but they were mythologized as a danger to humans, a menace to ranchers and competition for big-game hunters. Because of this, they were deliberately hunted from the 1870s onward, until the last wolf pack was killed in 1926.

In the 70 years of the wolves' absence, the entire Yellowstone National Park's ecosystem had fallen out of balance. Coyotes ran rampant, and the elk population exploded, overgrazing willows and aspens. Without those trees, songbirds began to decline, beavers could no longer build their dams and riverbanks started to erode. Without beaver dams and the shade from trees and other plants, water temperatures were too high for cold-water fish. In 1995, wolves were re-introduced, and their return stimulated a transformation back to the vitality and diversity that was lost.

We often don't know the value of something until after it's gone. This highlights the limiting nature of what we can know, as we can only know things from our own perspective, as humans living in the world today.

Looking back in history, we could derive that a 'common enemy' often unites people and brings out altruistic qualities to act for the good of the nation or collective. But without this external enemy what happens? In my view, the 'Bad Othering' attitudes then come closer to home: the angry outbursts on Twitter, the attacks on the government or opposition, the different attitudes around 'mask wearing vs non mask wearing.' And by the way, I am as guilty of this as the next person.

But what is the alternative? Good question. As in the 'Bad Othering' attitude, there is a particular comfort - I am in the right, and 'they' (whoever 'they' are) are in the wrong. I can feel quite exercised and righteous in my positions and am buoyed up when others agree with me. Yet, I know full well that this attitude is problematic. Regardless of who is 'right' or 'wrong', and I don't know who decides this (would it be some higher being? G-d?) I am simply a player in the game, as others are. This may be leading to an argument for a higher being or G-d to either mediate, which I don't see as the role that G-d has played in the 'stories' of the Torah, or more simply to tell us what to do!

But in the Noah story, it seems G-d decided to 'clear the decks' and then hand the reins over to the humans - he grants the new populations starting with Noah and his family a new right to kill animals for food - here giving humans a more G-d-like status of having the permission to kill another being for their own sustenance. A sort of top of the hierarchy in the chain of living beings. And in addition to this, the covenant that G-d will not intervene again and clear the world of badness. So, in a sense handing over to humans the rod of responsibility - here you go, let's see how you get on with it.

I do think it's easy to say we as human beings have made a mess of it, but I don't believe this is 100% true.

I think we have achieved much that is good and continue to do so, whilst making many mistakes and carrying out injustices and unthinkable atrocities to individuals and populations, as well as damaging our environment. But I don't believe all is lost.

I'd like to think that if we can respect our own qualities and value as a human race, and respect animals and our environment, and find a way to understand those who we don't agree with, and more importantly those who do bad and terrible things, as co-habitees in this human and animal sojourn on earth, it would be a very useful exercise. Perhaps we can see what it's like to open our minds to think about how we can live in a society with whom and what we deem as 'others' and find a mutual existence where we can have security, whilst finding a way to live alongside those who have different values and behaviours to us.

This is a huge challenge, but I think it would benefit human- and animal-kind if we strive to find a path forward, which looks at compromise and solutions which can allow all of us to live a decent life with respect and integrity.

Shabbat Shalom

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